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THE BEST FROM MANHUNT

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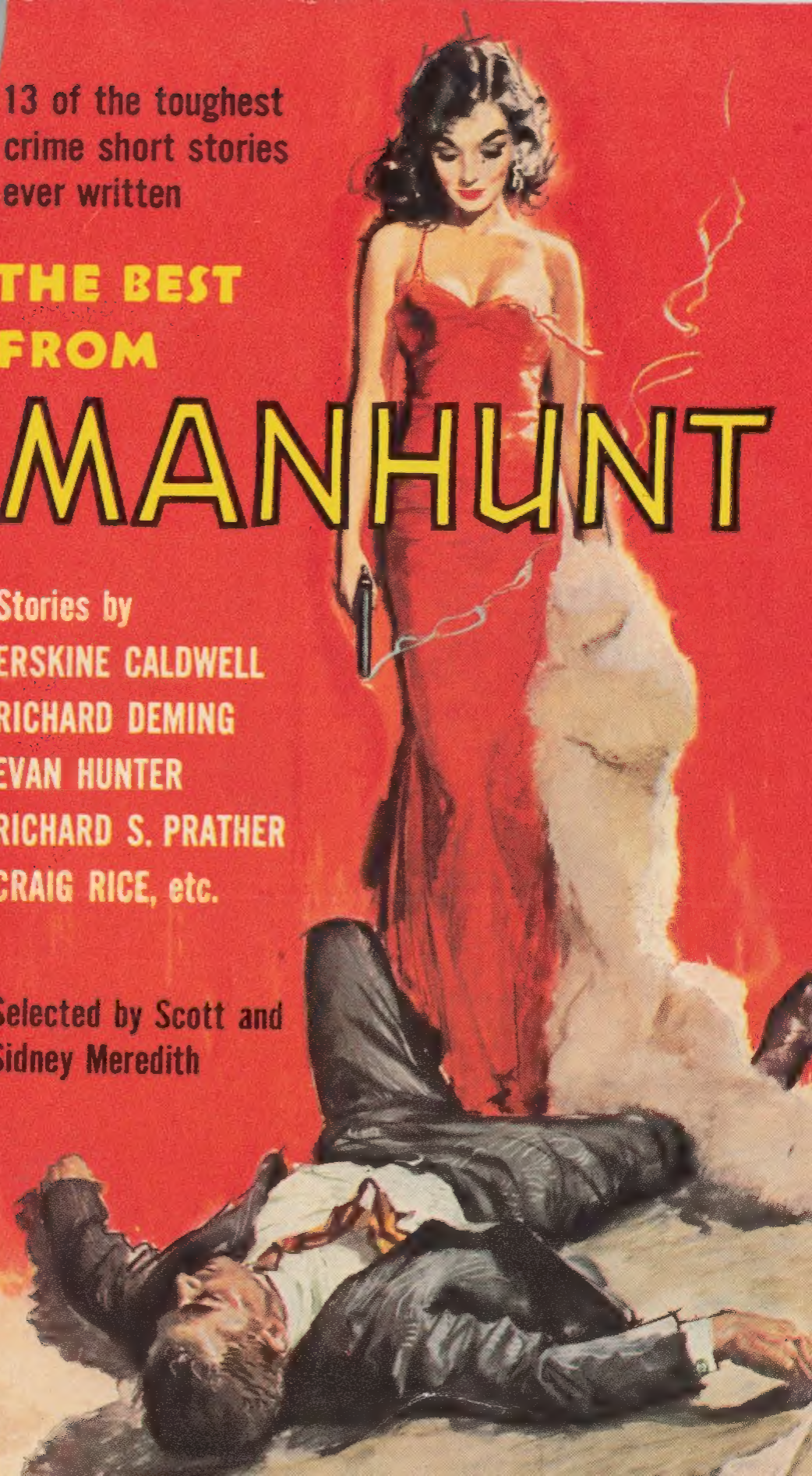
Selected by Scott and Sidney Meredith



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SCENES FROM
THE BEST FROM MANHUNT

She didn't respond, and remembering his toothbrush, he went into the bathroom for it. When he came out, she was standing there with a .38 in her hand.

He laughed aloud and started for her, and he just couldn't believe it when the slug slammed into his shoulder.

—From *The Collector Comes After Payday*, by Fletcher Flora

I was Shell Scott, the Bloodshot Eye, and I needed a hair of the horse that bit me. . . . The door to 714 was locked, and I had almost decided I'd have to bribe a bellboy, when a key clicked in the lock, and the door swung open. A girl stood there yawning, her eyes nearly closed. She was stark naked.

—From *The Double Take*, by Richard S. Prather

"Maybe you better turn around, Marty," the blond man said softly.

The tall man turned his back and then, abruptly, began to run. He had taken four steps when a bullet cut him down, onto his knees. There were three more shots, and then he cried out once, softly, and fell forward on his face.

—From *Day's Work*, by Jonathan Lord

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THE BEST FROM MANHUNT

Selected and with introductions by

Scott and Sidney Meredith

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THE BEST FROM *MANHUNT*

PERMABOOK edition published May, 1958
1st printing ..... March, 1958

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To

HELEN AND ANN

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIRTY YEARS AGO a young oil-company executive named Raymond Chandler and a young private detective named Dashiell Hammett began to pick up a few bucks on the side by writing a new and entirely different kind of crime fiction. Their stories, which revolutionized the genre, were based on a simple premise which is elementary to any working cop: the fact that murder is sordid.

Chandler and Hammett were the first writers to abandon what might be called the genteel-puzzle school of mystery fiction and write about crime the way it really happens; they were the first to write crime stories the way a couple of hardened harness bulls might discuss real cases which had just been wrapped up in the precinct.

They knew, for one thing, that real-life murder is rarely a mystery, that the average killing is a husband-wife or known-enemies case, with the arrest just a routine pick-up. They knew that a real-life killer who got fancy and tried an elaborate murder of the puzzle-story type would run up against modern criminology and be nabbed in ten minutes, and that most real murders which remain temporarily or permanently in the Open File as unsolved are those in which an unknown thug belts a stranger in an alley to get his wallet—and just happens to hit too hard. They knew that there probably hasn't been a case in history which has been solved by a gifted, eccentric amateur, that murders are solved by homicide detectives—hard, tough guys in a hard, tough job.

And they knew that murder and other crime is several hundred times more likely to occur in the slums, the backwaters, the tough sections of town, than in the mansions of the rich and other upper-crust locales favored by the genteel-puzzle

writers; and that detectives are bound to have considerably more traffic with prostitutes and pimps than with presidents of banks, considerably more dealings with stoolies and snowbirds than with society matrons, and considerably more contact with the mugging, the rape, and the knife-in-the-gut-in-a-barroom-brawl than with the Well-Dressed-Body-in-the-Library.

And so Chandler and Hammett, and the others who followed close behind them, began to write about the *real* crimes and the *real* locales and the *real* crime-solvers and investigation methods, and in so doing created an entirely new field of fiction: the grim, realistic, unsugared, and honest crime story. Their stories were rarely pretty, but always plausible; sometimes frightening, but never merely foolish.

When you read the early Chandler and Hammett, you realize that, like most pioneering projects that have since been improved upon, the stuff was pretty crude and imperfect. But this no more diminishes the significance of their invention than going to Europe on the S.S. *United States* lessens the importance of Fulton's invention of the steamboat. The simple fact is that the tough, realistic crime story has been brought a long way in thirty years by many writers—including Chandler and Hammett themselves in their later work. And much of this progress has been the result of a little magazine called *Manhunt.*

Manhunt, created and published by the late Archer St. John and subsequently carried on by his son Michael, came along after *Black Mask* (which had published the earliest efforts in the tough-crime field) had worn itself out and ceased publication; and the new magazine was noticeable from the start as the deep-sea-swim of tough-crime fiction as compared to *Black Mask's* first tentative steps in the murky water. It was created to give readers in short form the same hard, unsentimental, bitterly realistic kind of crime story usually available only in booklengths, particularly paperback books, and the editors made it clear from the start that the magazine was for neither the sensitive nor the romantic.

"We don't want the kind of story which *might* happen,"

said an early editorial bulletin to authors. "We want the kind of story which *does* happen—in Harlem, on Times Square at 4 A.M., on the country's skid rows, in the isolated and struggling areas of the Deep South, places like that. We don't want sentiment and we don't want prettifying; we want the same kind of realism a New York detective employs when he tells you there are so many muggings, criminal assaults, and even murders in certain parts of the city that the metropolitan newspapers don't even bother to run a two-line story on a crime there. We're as much interested in the whydunit and the howdunit as the whodunit, and we want our stuff to be tough as hell. . . ."

From the start, *Manhunt* has been a showcase for the best in realistic crime fiction, and for the best writers in the field and those other writers who occasionally do tough stories, among them Evan Hunter, Richard S. Prather, Mickey Spillane, Henry Kane, Frank Kane, Richard Deming, Bruno Fischer, Fredric Brown, Hal Ellson, John Ross Macdonald, Wade Miller, Erskine Caldwell, James M. Cain, Nelson Algren, W. R. Burnett, James T. Farrell, Meyer Levin, Erle Stanley Gardner, Rex Stout, Craig Rice, William Irish, and a great many others.

In this anthology, selected from the seven-hundred-plus stories published in *Manhunt* thus far, we've included the thirteen stories that we believe are among the very best published by the magazine to date. There are so many really first-rate stories in *Manhunt* that this is a mere scratching of the surface. We hope to bring you many more in later collections, including some that we'd have liked to use in the present collection if we'd had more space.

In any case, we think these stories illustrate tough-crime writing at its best. And we think that, if you like 'em tough, you're going to enjoy the fiction that follows.

—Scott and Sidney Meredith

EVAN HUNTER

EVAN HUNTER'S spectacular rise to fame is the result of many factors, but certainly one of the most important of these is his unsurpassed gift for realism and the unmistakable ring of truth in the stories he tells. His first major novel, *The Blackboard Jungle*, stunned its millions of readers with its blunt, totally documented picture of the brutal conditions existing in big-city trade schools, and his subsequent books and stories have been equally realistic, honest, and disturbing. The story that follows is no sewing-circle picnic, either, but Hunter knows his locales and the people who live there better than any other writer today, and let's face it: this is the way it happens to be.

On the Sidewalk Bleeding

THE BOY LAY BLEEDING in the rain. He was sixteen years old, and he wore a bright-purple silk jacket, and the lettering across the back of the jacket read *The Royals*. The boy's name was Tony, and the name was delicately scripted in black thread on the front of the jacket, just over his heart.

He had been stabbed ten minutes ago. The knife had entered just below his rib cage and been drawn across his body violently, tearing a wide gap in his flesh. He lay on the sidewalk, with the March rain drilling his jacket and drilling his body and washing away the blood which poured from his open wound. He had known excruciating pain when the knife had torn across his body, and then sudden, comparative relief when the blade was pulled away. He had heard the voice saying, "That's for you, Royal!" and then the sound of footsteps hurrying into the rain, and then he had fallen to the

sidewalk, clutching his stomach, trying to stop the flow of blood.

He tried to yell for help, but he had no voice. He did not know why his voice had deserted him, or why the rain had become so suddenly fierce, or why there was an open hole in his body from which his life ran redly, steadily. It was 11:30 P.M., but he did not know the time. There was another thing he did not know.

He did not know that he was dying. He did not know that unless a doctor stopped the flow of blood, he would be dead within a half hour. He lay on the sidewalk bleeding, and he thought only: *That was a fierce rumble. They got me good that time,* but he did not know he was dying. He would have been frightened had he known. But in his ignorance, he lay bleeding. He wished he could yell for help, but there was no voice in his throat. There was only the bubbling of blood from between his lips whenever he opened his mouth to speak. He lay silent in his pain, waiting, waiting for someone to find him.

By midnight, if they did not stop the flow of blood, he would be dead.

He could hear the sound of automobile tires hushed on the muzzle of rain-swept streets, far away at the other end of the long alley. He lay with his face pressed to the sidewalk, and he could see the splash of neon far away at the other end of the alley, tinting the pavement red and green, slickly brilliant in the rain.

He wondered if Laura would be angry.

He had left the jump to get a package of cigarettes. He had told her he would be back in a few minutes, and then he had gone downstairs and found the candy store closed. He knew that Alfredo's on the next block would be open until at least two, and he had started through the alley, and that was when he'd been ambushed. He could hear the faint sound of music now, coming from what seemed a long, long way off, and he wondered if Laura was dancing, wondered if she had missed him yet. Maybe she thought he wasn't coming

back. Maybe she thought he'd cut out for good. Maybe she'd leave the jump and go home. He thought of her face, the brown eyes and the jet-black hair, and thinking of her he forgot his pain a little, forgot that blood was rushing from his body. Someday he would marry Laura. Someday he would marry her, and they would have a lot of kids, and then they would get out of the neighborhood. They would move to a clean project in the Bronx, or maybe they would move to Staten Island. When they were married. When they had kids. Someday.

It was 11:35.

He heard footsteps at the other end of the alley, and he lifted his cheek from the sidewalk and looked into the darkness, and tried to yell, but again there was only a soft hissing bubble of blood on his mouth. The man came down the alley. He had not seen Tony yet. He walked, and then stopped to lean against the brick of the building, and then walked again. He saw Tony and came toward him, and he stood over him for a long time, the minutes ticking, ticking, watching him and not speaking.

Then he said, "Whussa matter, buddy-buddy?"

Tony could not speak, and Tony could not move. He lifted his face slightly and looked up at the man, and in the rain-swept alley he smelled the sickening odor of alcohol, and then he realized the man was drunk. He did not feel any particular panic. He did not know he was dying, and so he felt only mild disappointment that the man who had found him was sauced up.

The man was smiling.

"You fall down, buddy-buddy?" he said. "You 'sdrunk ezz I am, buddy-buddy? I feel sick. I really feel sick. Don' go 'way. I'll be ri' back."

The man lurched away from Tony. He heard his footsteps, and then the sound of the man colliding with a garbage can, and some mild swearing, and then all was lost in the steady wash of the rain. He waited for the man to come back.

It was 11:39.

When the man returned, he squatted alongside Tony. He studied him with drunken dignity.

"You gonna cash cold here," he said. "Whussa matter? You like layin' in the wet?"

Tony could not answer. The man tried to focus his eyes on Tony's face. The rain spattered around them.

"You like a drink?"

Tony shook his head.

"You had enough, huh?"

Again Tony shook his head.

"I gotta bottle. Here," the man said. He pulled a pint bottle from his inside jacket pocket. He uncorked it and extended it to Tony. Tony tried to move, but pain wrenched him back flat against the sidewalk.

"Take it," the man said. He kept watching Tony. "Take it." When Tony did not move, he said, "Whussa matter? You too good to drink wi' me?" He kept watching him with the flat, blank eyes of a reptile. "Nev' mind," he said at last. "I'll have one m'self." He tilted the bottle to his lips, and then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "You too young to be drinkin', anyway. Should be 'shamed of yourself, drunk an' layin' down in a alley, all wet. Shame. Shame on you. I gotta good minda calla cop."

Tony nodded. *Yes, yes,* he tried to say. *Call a cop. Go. Call one.*

"Oh, you don' like that, huh?" the drunk said. "You don' wanna cop to fine you all drunk an' wet in a alley, huh? Okay, buddy-buddy. This time you get off easy. I'm a good Joe, tha's why." He got to his feet. "This time you lucky," he said. He waved broadly at Tony, and then almost lost his footing. "S'long, buddy-buddy," he said.

Wait, Tony thought. *Wait, please, I'm bleeding.*

"S'long," the drunk said again. "I see you aroun'," and then he staggered off up the alley, and Tony watched him go, watched the figure retreat until it passed into the world of red and green neon and automobile tires hushed on the rain-swept muzzle of the street at the end of the long alley far away.

It was 11:41.

He lay and thought, *Laura, Laura. Are you dancing?*

The couple came into the alley at 11:43. They ran into the alley together, running from the rain, the boy holding the girl's elbow, the girl spreading a newspaper over her head to protect her hair. Tony lay crumpled against the pavement, and he watched them run into the alley laughing, and then duck into the doorway not ten feet from him.

"Man, what rain!" the boy said. "You could drown out there."

"I have to get home," the girl said. "It's late, Mario. I have to get home."

"We got time," Mario said. "Your people won't raise a fuss if you're a little late. Not with this kind of weather."

"It's dark," the girl said, and she giggled.

"Yeah," the boy answered, his voice very low.

"Mario . . . ?"

"Um?"

"You're . . . you're standing very close to me."

"Um."

There was a long silence. Then the girl said, "Ohhhhh." Only that single word, and Tony knew she'd been kissed, and he suddenly hungered for Laura's mouth, hungered for it with a fierce, painfully sweet nostalgia. It was then that he wondered if he would ever kiss Laura again. It was then that he wondered if he was dying.

No, he thought, *I can't be dying, not from a little street rumble, not from just getting cut. Guys get cut all the time. All the time in rumbles. I can't be dying. No, that's stupid. That don't make any sense at all.*

"You shouldn't," the girl said.

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"So?"

"I don't know."

"I love you, Angela," the boy said.

"I love you, too, Mario," the girl said, and Tony listened and thought, *I love you, Laura. Laura, I think maybe I'm dying. Laura, this is stupid but I think maybe I'm dying. Laura, I think I'm dying!*

He tried to speak. He tried to move. He tried to crawl toward that doorway where he could see the two figures in embrace. He tried to make a noise, a sound, and a grunt came from his lips, and then he tried again, and another grunt escaped his body, a low, animal grunt of pain.

"What was that?" the girl said, suddenly alarmed, breaking away from the boy.

"I don't know," he answered.

"Go look, Mario."

"No. Wait."

Tony moved his lips again. Again the sound came from him.

"Mario!"

"What?"

"I'm scared."

"I'll go see," the boy said.

He stepped into the alley. He walked over to where Tony lay on the ground. He stood over him, watching him.

"You all right?" he asked.

"What is it?" Angela said from the doorway.

"Somebody's hurt," Mario said.

"Let's get out of here," Angela said.

"No. Wait a minute." He knelt down beside Tony. "You cut?" he asked.

Tony nodded. The boy kept looking at him. He saw the lettering on his jacket then. *The Royals.* He turned to Angela.

"He's a Royal," he said.

"Let's . . . what . . . what do you want to do, Mario?"

"I don't know. I don't want to get mixed up in this. He's a Royal. We help him, and the Guardians'll be down on our necks. I don't want to get mixed up in this, Angela."

"Is he . . . is he hurt bad?"

"Yeah, it looks that way."

"What shall we do?"

"I don't know."

"We can't leave him here in the rain." Angela hesitated. "Can we?"

"If we get a cop, the Guardians'll find out who," Mario said. "I don't know, Angela. I don't know."

Angela hesitated a long time before answering. Then she said, "I have to get home, Mario. My people will begin to worry."

"Yeah," Mario said. He looked at Tony again. "You all right?" he asked. Tony lifted his face from the sidewalk, and his eyes said, *Please, please help me,* and maybe Mario read what his eyes were saying, and maybe he didn't.

Behind him, Angela said, "Mario, let's get out of here! Please!" There was urgency in her voice, urgency bordering on the edge of panic. Mario stood up. He looked at Tony again, and then mumbled, "I'm sorry," and then he took Angela's arm and together they ran toward the neon splash at the other end of the alley.

They're afraid of the Guardians, Tony thought. *Why should they be? I wasn't afraid of the Guardians. I never turkeyed out of a rumble with the Guardians. I got heart. But I'm bleeding.*

It was 11:49. It was eleven minutes to midnight.

The rain was soothing, somehow. It was a cold rain, but his body was hot all over, and the rain helped to cool him. He had always liked rain. He could remember sitting in Laura's house one time, with the rain running down the windows, and just looking out over the street, watching the people running from the rain. That was when he'd first joined the Royals. He could remember how happy he was the Royals had taken him. The Royals and the Guardians, two of the biggest. He was a Royal. There had been meaning to the title.

Now, in the alley, with the cold rain washing his hot body, he wondered about the meaning. If he died, he was Tony. He was not a Royal. He was simply Tony, and he was dead. And he wondered suddenly if the Guardians who had ambushed him and knifed him had ever once realized he was Tony? Had

they known that he was Tony, or had they simply known that he was a Royal wearing a purple silk jacket? Had they stabbed *him*, Tony, or had they only stabbed the jacket and the title, and what good was the title if you were dying?

I'm Tony, he screamed wordlessly. *For Christ's sake, I'm Tony!*

At 11:51, the old lady stopped at the other end of the alley. The garbage cans were stacked there, beating noisily in the rain. The old lady carried an umbrella with broken ribs, carried it with all the dignity of a queen. She stepped into the mouth of the alley, a shopping bag over one arm. She lifted the lids of the garbage cans delicately, and she did not hear Tony grunt because she was a little deaf and because the rain was beating a steady relentless tattoo on the garbage cans. The old lady was a little deaf and a little tired. She had been searching in garbage cans for the better part of the night. She collected her string, and her newspapers, and an old hat with a feather on it from one of the garbage cans, and a broken footstool from another of the cans. And then she delicately replaced the lids, and lifted her umbrella high and walked out of the alley mouth with queenly dignity. She had worked swiftly and soundlessly. When she left the alley, it was only 11:53, only seven minutes from midnight.

The alley looked very long now. He could see people passing at the other end of it, and he wondered who the people were, and he wondered if he would ever get to know them, wondered who it was on the Guardians who had stabbed him, who had plunged the knife into his body.

"That's for you, Royal!" the voice had said, and then the footsteps, his arms being released by the others, the fall to the pavement. "That's for you, Royal!" Even in his pain, even as he collapsed, there had been some sort of pride to knowing he was a Royal. Now there was no pride at all. Now, with the rain beginning to chill him, with the blood pouring steadily between his fingers, he knew only a sort of dizziness, and within the giddy dizziness, he could only think, *I want to be Tony.*

It was not very much to ask of the world. He watched the world passing at the other end of the alley. He lay unnoticed, and the world passed him by. The world didn't know he was Tony. The world didn't know he was alive. He wanted to say, "Hey, I'm alive! Hey, look at me! I'm alive! Don't you know I'm alive? Don't you know I exist?"

He felt very weak and very tired. He felt alone and wet and feverish and chilled, and he knew he was going to die, and the knowledge made him suddenly sad. He was not frightened. For some reason he was not frightened. He was only filled with an overwhelming sadness that his life would be over at sixteen. He felt all at once as if he had never done anything, never seen anything, never been anywhere. There were so many things to do, and he wondered why he'd never thought of them before, wondered why the rumbles and the jumps and the purple jacket had always seemed so important to him before, and now they seemed like such small things in a world he was missing, in a world that was rushing past at the other end of the alley.

I don't want to die, he thought. *I haven't lived yet, so why should I die?*

It seemed very important to him that he take off the purple jacket. He was very close to dying, and when they found him, he did not want them to say, "Oh, it's a Royal." With great effort he rolled over onto his back. He felt the pain tearing at his stomach when he moved, a pain he did not think was possible. But he wanted to take off the jacket. If he never did another thing, he wanted to take off the jacket. The jacket had only one meaning now, and that was a very simple meaning.

If he had not been wearing the jacket, he would not have been stabbed. The knife had not been plunged in hatred of Tony, the knife had hated only the purple jacket. The jacket was a stupid meaningless thing that was robbing him of his life. He wanted the jacket off his back. With an enormous loathing he wanted the jacket off his back.

He lay struggling with the sleek, shiny material. His arms were heavy, and pain ripped fire across his body whenever

he moved. But he squirmed and fought and twisted until one arm was free and then the other, and then he rolled away from the jacket and lay quite still, breathing heavily, listening to the sound of his breathing and the sound of the rain and thinking, *Rain is sweet, I'm Tony.*

She arrived with the policeman at 12:05.

She had found him in the alleyway at 12:01, a minute past midnight. She had left the dance to look for him, and when she found him she knelt beside him and said, "Tony, it's me, Laura."

He had not answered her. She had backed away from him, tears springing into her eyes, and then she had run from the alley hysterically, and she had not stopped running until she'd found the cop.

And now, standing with the cop, she looked down at him, and the cop rose and said, "He's dead," and all the crying was out of her now. She stood in the rain and said nothing, looking at the dead boy on the pavement, and looking at the purple jacket that rested a foot away from his body.

The cop picked up the jacket and turned it over in his hands.

"A Royal, huh?" he said.

The rain seemed to beat more steadily now, more fiercely.

She looked at the cop, and very quietly she said, *"His name is Tony."*

The cop slung the jacket over his arm. He took out his black pad, and he flipped it open to a blank page.

"A Royal," he said. Then he began writing.

RICHARD DEMING

Most readers of Dick Deming's stories and novels are startled when they meet him personally, because he is a young, handsome, clean-cut, soft-spoken man who looks as if he's never had a violent thought in his life. On the contrary, violence is Dick Deming's business, and he has committed perhaps a hundred murders in his one-million-plus words of published fiction, many of them murders of a particularly strange and unusual nature. Here is one of his strangest murders and best stories: the story of a man who can never be punished for his killings.

Mugger Murder

I was surprised to see Sergeant Nels Parker in the Coroner's Court audience, for homicide detectives spend too much of their time there on official business to develop any morbid curiosity about cases not assigned to them. I was in the audience myself, of course, but as a police reporter. This was my regular beat on Friday mornings, and after five years of similar Friday mornings, nothing but the continued necessity of making a living could have gotten me within miles of the place.

When I spotted him two rows ahead of me, I moved up and slid into the vacant seat next to him.

"Busman's holiday, Sergeant?" I asked.

His long face turned, and he cocked one dull eye at me. For so many years Nels had practiced looking dull in order to throw homicide witnesses off guard, the expression had become habitual.

"How are you, Sam?" he said.

"You haven't got a case today, have you?" I persisted.

His head gave a small shake, and he turned his eyes front

again. Since he seemed to have no desire to explain his presence, I let the matter drop. But as the only inquest scheduled was on the body of a Joseph Garcia, age twenty-one and of no known address, I at least knew what case interested him.

The first witness was a patrolman named Donald Lutz, a thick-bodied and round-faced young fellow who looked as though he, like the dead man, was no more than twenty-one.

In response to the deputy coroner's request to describe the circumstances of Joseph Garcia's death as he knew them, the youthful patrolman said, "Well, it was Wednesday . . . night before last . . . about eleven thirty, and I was walking my beat along Broadway just south of Market. As I passed this alley mouth I heard a scuffling sound in the alley and flashed my light down it. I saw these two guys struggling, one with a hammer lock on the other guy's head, and just as my light touched them, the guy with the hammer lock gave a hard twist, the other guy went sort of limp, and the first guy let him drop to the alley floor. I moved in with my night stick ready, but the guy stood still and made no move either to run or come at me. He just stood there with his hands at his sides and said, 'Officer, this man tried to rob me.'

"I told him to stand back, and knelt to look at the man lying down. Near as I could tell, he was dead, but in the dark with just a flashlight I couldn't be sure, and I didn't want to take a chance on him waking up and running away while I went to the nearest call box. So I stayed right there and used my stick on the concrete to bring the cop from the next beat. That was Patrolman George Mason.

"Mason went to call for a patrol car and a doctor while I stayed with the two guys. That's about all I know about things, except when the doctor got there he said the guy lying down was dead."

The deputy coroner said, "And the dead man was later identified as Joseph Garcia?"

Patrolman Lutz nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And the man Garcia was struggling with. Will you identify him, please?"

The policeman pointed his finger at a short, plump man of about fifty seated in a chair apart from the audience and within a few feet of where the jury was lined up along the left wall. He was a quietly dressed man with a bland, faintly vacuous smile and an appearance of softness about him until you examined him closely. Then you suspected that a good deal of his plumpness was muscle rather than fat, and you noticed his shoulders were unnaturally wide.

"That's him there," the young patrolman said. "Robert Hummel."

Just in front of the platform containing the deputy coroner's bench was a long table, one end pointing toward the platform and the other end toward the audience. On the right side of this table, seated sidewise to it with his back to the audience, sat the assistant circuit attorney in charge of the case. On its left side sat Marcus Prout, one of St. Louis's most prominent criminal lawyers.

Now the assistant C.A. said, "Patrolman Lutz, I understand Robert Hummel had in his possession a thirty-eight-caliber pistol at the time of the incident you just described. Is that right?"

"Well, not exactly in his possession, sir. It was lying in the alley near by, where he'd dropped it. It turned out he had a permit to carry it."

Marcus Prout put in, "Officer, was there any other weapon in sight?"

"Yes, sir. An open clasp knife lay in the alley. This was later established as belonging to the deceased. Robert Hummel claimed Garcia drew it on him, he in turn drew his gun to defend himself and ordered the deceased to drop the knife. However, the deceased continued to come at him. Hummel said he didn't want to shoot the man, so he used the gun to knock the knife from Garcia's hand, then dropped the gun and grappled with him."

The lawyer asked, "Was there any mark on the deceased's wrist to support that statement?"

"The post mortem report notes a bruise," the deputy coroner interrupted, and glanced over at the jury.

Marcus Prout rose from his chair and strolled toward the patrolman. "Officer, did the deceased . . . this Joseph Garcia . . . have a police record?"

"Yes, sir. One arrest and a suspended sentence for mugging."

"Mugging is a slang term for robbery with force, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Generally without a weapon. You get a guy around the neck from behind and go through his pockets with your free hand. There's other methods classified as mugging, but that's the way Garcia did it the time he was convicted."

The lawyer said, "Did you draw any inference from the fact that Robert Hummel, with a gun against a knife, used the gun merely to disarm his opponent and then grappled with him with his bare hands?"

The policeman said, "I don't exactly know what you mean."

"I mean, did it not occur to you as obvious Robert Hummel's statement that he did not wish to shoot his opponent was true, and that he went out of his way to avoid seriously injuring Garcia, when under the circumstances he would have been fully justified in shooting the man through the heart? And that Garcia's subsequent death in spite of Mr. Hummel's precaution must have been an accident resulting from Robert Hummel's exerting more strength than he intended in the excitement of the moment?"

This leading question would have been stricken from the record in a regular court, of course, for not only was it deliberately slanted at the jury rather than the witness, it asked for an opinion on a matter of which the witness could not possibly have had actual knowledge. But in Coroner's Court the legal formalities of a court of law are almost entirely lacking inasmuch as no one is on trial for anything, the jury's sole duty being to determine how the deceased met death. I was therefore not surprised when neither the assistant circuit attorney nor the deputy coroner made any objection to the question.

Patrolman Lutz said he had not thought about the matter, which seemed to satisfy Marcus Prout, as he had asked the

question only to implant it in the jury's mind, anyway. The lawyer went back to his seat.

When the deputy coroner asked if there were any more questions, both Prout and the assistant C.A. shook their heads. The patrolman was dismissed, and Norman Paisley was called as a witness.

Norman Paisley was a thin, dried up man of middle age who looked like a school janitor. To the deputy coroner's first question he gave his address as a rooming house on South Broadway two blocks south of Market.

"Were you a customer at Stoyle's Tavern on Sixth near Olive this past Wednesday night?" the deputy coroner asked.

"Yes, sir. All evening from seven till they closed at one thirty."

"Did you know the deceased Joseph Garcia?"

"To talk to, yes, sir. I used to run into him at Stoyle's Tavern off and on. I didn't know where he lived or what he did, or nothing like that, though."

"I see. Was the deceased a customer at Stoyle's that night?"

"Yes, sir. He come in several times during the evening. I guess he was bar cruising all up and down Sixth Street."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, sir."

The deputy coroner said, "Do you recognize any other person now present as a customer at Stoyle's the night before last?"

Norman Paisley pointed at Robert Hummel. "Him. He come in about a quarter of eleven and left at eleven fifteen. I noticed him particular because he bought the house a couple of drinks."

The assistant C.A. cut in. "Was Joseph Garcia present during this period?"

"Yes, sir. He even remarked about it. When Mr. Hummel bought a drink, Joe said to me, 'That damn fool must be made of money. He just bought the house a drink at a place I was in up the street.' "

Marcus Prout asked, "Did you get the impression Garcia was following Hummel?"

"No, sir. Joe come in first, as a matter of fact, and Mr. Hummel come in right after him."

The lawyer looked surprised. He started to ask another question, changed his mind and waved his hand dismissingly. The assistant C.A. stepped into the breach.

"Mr. Paisley, did you get the impression the deceased was particularly interested in Robert Hummel?"

"Not right at first. But when Hummel bought the second drink, he happened to be standing close to Joe at the bar, and when he opened his wallet to pay, Joe looked kind of startled. I was standing the other side of Joe, but even from there I could see there was a lot of bills in it. After that Joe couldn't seem to keep his eyes off Hummel."

Marcus Prout spoke again. "When Hummel finally left the bar, did Garcia follow him?"

"Yes, sir. He went right out after him."

The assistant C.A. said, "Did you get the impression Garcia left because Hummel did? That is, that the deceased was actually following Mr. Hummel? Or that he just happened to leave about the same time?"

"Why, I don't know," Paisley said. "I never thought about it at the time. I guess Joe must of followed him out figuring to roll him."

Marcus Prout smiled at this answer, and the assistant C.A. grunted. When both indicated they had no further questions, the witness was dismissed.

Shuffling the papers in front of him, the deputy coroner located the post mortem report, cleared his throat, and said, "The autopsy shows death by suffocation due to a crushed larynx."

Following this announcement, he rose from his bench, advanced to the edge of the platform, and asked in a loud voice, "Are any relatives of the deceased present?"

When there was no reply to this routine question, he turned to the jury and signified they were to go out.

While the six-man jury was out, I tried to figure what Nels Parker's interest in the case could be. On the surface it was simply a case of a mugger killed in self-defense by his in-

tended victim, and the inquest was obviously a routine affair designed to clear the intended victim of any blame. The slant of the questions, not only those of Robert Hummel's lawyer but those of the assistant circuit attorney and the deputy coroner as well, indicated no one expected or wanted any verdict other than justifiable homicide.

I had no time to question Nels about it, though, for the jury was out only thirty seconds. When it filed back in, the foreman read the verdict I expected: justifiable homicide.

Ordinarily, beyond noting down his name, age, and address for my news item, I would have paid no further attention to the man who had just been cleared of homicide, for he was not a particularly impressive person. Nels Parker's unexplained interest in the case intrigued me, though, and noting the sergeant continued to linger in the courtroom until Robert Hummel finished shaking hands with his lawyer and finally moved toward the door, I lingered beside him.

When Robert Hummel was erect, you were less conscious of his unusually broad shoulders and the muscle underlying his fat than you were when he was seated. He looked like a well-fed businessman who had reached the age when he ought to start watching his blood pressure. He also looked like the last person in the world you would expect to resist a professional mugger so successfully and so violently that the mugger ended up dead.

As the man passed from the courtroom, Nels continued to watch his back through the open door until he reached the stairs at the end of the hall and started down. Then the sergeant gave his head a slight shake and moved toward the stairs himself.

Falling in beside him, I said, "Buy you a drink, Sergeant?"

His dull eyes flicked at me. "One beer, maybe. I got to get back to Homicide."

The nearest tavern to the Coroner's Court Building was a half block west. I waited until we were standing at the bar with a pair of draft beers in front of us before I asked any questions.

Then I said, "A story hidden here somewhere, Sergeant?"

He shook his head, tapped his glass once on the bar to indicate luck, and sipped at his beer. "No story, Sam."

"Not even off the record?"

"Just a pipe dream I had, Sam. You couldn't print it without risking a libel suit."

"Then I won't print it. But I got curiosity. Whose case was this Garcia's? On Homicide, I mean."

"Corporal Brady," Nels said. "He wasn't there because the thing was so routine all they needed was the beat cop's testimony. Probably I ought to have my head examined for wasting my time on a case I wasn't even assigned to."

When he lapsed into silence I asked, "What's the story?"

He drank half his beer before he answered. Then he said, "I was just interested because this guy Hummel killed a guy once before."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Almost the same circumstances, too," the sergeant said. "A mugger down along Commercial Alley. Only that time the guy's larynx wasn't crushed. Hummel just choked him to death."

"Judus Priest!" I said. "Was there an inquest?"

Nels nodded. "Routine. Happened about twelve years ago. There's no doubt it was on the up and up. The mugger had a record as long as your arm, and it was pretty well established Hummel never saw the guy before he was suddenly waylaid by him. Apparently the mugger had been loitering in a doorway for some time waiting for a likely victim to pass, for they turned up a witness placing him there a full hour before he tangled with Hummel. Picking Hummel was pure accident, and the mugger was just unlucky to jump a guy who looked soft, but turned out to have the strength of a gorilla." The sergeant paused, then added reflectively, "There wasn't any of this flashing a roll in dives then."

His tone as he made the last statement struck me as odd. "What do you mean by that?" I asked.

But the sergeant ignored my question. "Hummel didn't carry a gun then, either. Matter of fact, it was as a result of the incident that he applied for a permit. He didn't have

trouble getting one, because he's an antique and rare-coin buyer and carries large amounts of cash."

"You've been doing some detailed checking on the man," I remarked.

"Yeah. But it doesn't add up."

I eyed him narrowly for a moment, then signaled the bartender for two more beers. I said, "Now give me the pipe dream."

"Pipe dream?" he asked.

"You mentioned your interest in the case was a kind of pipe dream. You think there's some connection between the two cases?"

Nels took a sip of his fresh beer and shook his head. "I'm sure there isn't. Not between the two muggers, anyway. Maybe a kind of psychological connection."

"What does that mean?"

"Well," the sergeant said slowly, "I figure the case twelve years ago was just what it seemed to be. A guy unexpectedly jumped Hummel, and Hummel killed him defending himself. So was the case today, I guess. With a slight difference. Maybe this time Hummel killed deliberately when he was jumped."

"You mean he deliberately lured Garcia into attacking him?"

"Think back over the testimony," Nels said. "Remember how surprised the great lawyer looked when the witness said Hummel had followed *Joe* in?"

"There was even something about Garcia remarking he had run into Hummel in another tavern. But why? What would be Hummel's motive?"

Nels was silent for a moment. Finally he said, "I checked back over unsolved homicides for the past twelve years, and seven of them were guys with records as muggers. They were found dead in alleys, some strangled, some broken necks."

"My God!" I said.

"That makes nine he could have killed."

For a moment I couldn't speak. "But why, for God's sake?"

Without inflection Nels said, "Twelve years ago I imagine Robert Hummel was just a normal guy. Or at least I imagine any abnormal urges he had were merely latent. Then he killed in self-defense. My pipe dream is that maybe he discovered he enjoyed it. You've heard of psychopathic killers."

"But . . . but . . ." I stuttered.

"But what? A guy flashes a roll in dives. There any law to stop him? A mugger tails him for an easy roll. The guy kills the mugger, and if nobody sees it, he just walks away. If he gets caught in the act, he merely tells the truth, and the law gives him a pat on the back for defending himself against attack by a criminal. It's a psychopath's dream. He's figured a way to kill legally."

"But . . ." I whispered. "But . . . he couldn't possibly again. . . ."

"The law says you can use whatever force is necessary to resist attack on your person or property. If you use more than necessary, theoretically you're guilty of manslaughter. In the case of a farmer shooting a kid stealing watermelons, we can prove unnecessary force, but how do you prove it in a case like today's? And even if we establish beyond reasonable doubt that Hummel deliberately enticed a robbery attempt . . . which we couldn't do without a confession, no matter what we suspect . . . he still has a legal right to defend himself."

"You mean you intend to do nothing about a homicidal maniac?"

"Sure," Nels said calmly. "Next time we'll put a white light in his face and hammer questions at him until Marcus Prout walks in with a writ of habeas corpus. But unless we get a confession that he used more force than necessary to protect himself, he's safe even if he kills a man every week."

He laughed without any humor whatever. "Beyond picking him up and questioning him every time he kills, there isn't one damned thing in the world we can do to stop him."

HELEN NIELSEN

A REVIEWER RECENTLY CALLED Helen Nielsen "the first major addition to the mystery field in the past decade," and shortly afterward *Manhunt's* editors expressed agreement in an editorial and listed that fact as one of the four reasons they publish so many of her stories. The second, they said, is that she can't be equaled when she does penetrating studies of ordinary people in crime situations (such as the story that follows), and the third is that "she writes as tough as any man." The fourth reason is a far less businesslike one. Miss Nielsen, they report, is easily the most beautiful writer in the field.

Decision

RUTH HAD NEVER BEEN in a courtroom before. It was exciting—like something from a movie or the television. She paused just inside the doorway, the matron at her side, and as she did so the flashbulbs began to explode, and all the people in the room turned to stare at her. For just a moment she was startled and embarrassed. One hand automatically tugged at the front of her blue wool suit jacket—it had a way of riding up since she'd put on weight. Not that Ruth was plump. Her figure was good—too good for comfort, because Ruth, although she'd trained herself to conceal it, was excessively shy. But she was also feminine. She tugged at the jacket, and then she brushed a wisp of blond hair from her forehead—and all of this with such a well-practiced concealment of emotion that the caption writers would be dusting off such phrases as "stony-faced tigress" and "iceberg killer" to fit under those pictures in the afternoon editions. By this time the flashbulbs had stopped exploding, and a policeman was clearing the way.

Ruth walked forward to the table where Mr. Jennings was waiting for her. He pulled out her chair and smiled.

"Good morning, Miss Kramer. You're looking well this morning."

Ruth didn't answer. She sat down, and then Mr. Jennings sat down beside her and began to fuss with some papers in his brief case. Mr. Jennings was rather shy himself—and nervous. Ruth had heard it remarked that this was his first capital case, which accounted for the nervousness. Public Defender. She ran the words over in her mind. They had a good sound. This man was going to defend her from the public. No, that wasn't what the words really meant. Ruth knew. She'd learned a great many in her thirty-odd years, and she knew what just about all the words meant; but that's the way they sounded to her when she ran them over in her mind. She liked Mr. Jennings. He reminded her of Allan. Younger and more serious, but just as neat. That was the important thing. His white shirt was freshly laundered, his narrow tie was clipped in place, and his suit must have just come from the pressers. He was clean shaven and smelled of one of those lotions the ad writers call brisk and masculine.

But staring at Mr. Jennings would only make him more nervous. Ruth looked about the courtroom. The jury was in the box, their assorted faces wearing different degrees of strain. Ruth's bland face concealed an inner smile. The jury seemed even more nervous than Mr. Jennings. It might have been on trial instead of her. Then she turned and looked at the spectators. No trial since the Romans had fed live dinners to the lions had been complete without them. The public—society. That was a word that amused her even more than the faces of the jury—society. There it was in its assembled might, neither frightening nor particularly offended. Curious was a better word. Curious society awaiting its cue to acquit or condemn, because society never knew until it was told what to do. It was like a huge mirror in which one saw not one reflection but that of a crowd.

If I smiled, Ruth thought, *they would smile back. If I*

waved my hand, they would wave their hands. They never do anything of themselves. They never act; they only react.

That was society, and she was outside of it now because she'd broken the first rule. She'd made a decision. . . .

Everybody in the neighborhood could tell you how devoted Ruth Kramer was to her parents. Such a good girl. Such a hard worker. Such a good provider since poor old Mr. Kramer had had to stop working. There wasn't a mother on the block who didn't envy Mrs. Kramer's relationship with her daughter. Not many young people were so thoughtful. Not many cared so much. Everybody in the neighborhood could tell you everything they knew about Ruth Kramer—which was nothing.

Ruth couldn't remember when she'd started hating her father. It might have been the time when she was five and caught him killing the puppies. They were newborn and hardly aware of life, and maybe it was the only thing to do, with times so hard and food so short; but it was horrible to watch him toss their bodies, still warm and wriggling, into the post holes he'd been digging for the back fence. It was even more horrible to hear him boast about it later.

"Six post holes, six puppies at the bottom. I saved myself all that work of digging graves."

"Otto, don't talk about it. Not in front of the child," Anna Kramer would say.

"Why not talk about it? She has to learn to save—work, money. Nobody can waste anything in life."

Otto Kramer had a simple philosophy. He never questioned life; he never argued with it. "A bed to sleep on, a table to eat on, a stove to cook on—what more do you need?" A very simple philosophy. Worry and fear belonged in a woman's world, and he had no sympathy for either. If Ruth had tears she could shed them in her mother's thin, tight arms. There was no other warmth in the world.

And there was no money to be wasted on the foolishness of pain.

"A woman is supposed to have babies. That's what she's

made for. I ain't got money to throw away on hospital bills. It's all foolishness, anyway. It's all in a woman's mind."

Otto Kramer spoke, and that was law. Anna never argued with her husband. She just grew thin and pale and cried a great deal when he was away, and when her time came it wasn't all in her mind, after all. Hidden behind the pantry door, a child heard everything.

"You thick-skulled old-country men ought to be horsewhipped!" the doctor said. "You lost a son for your stinginess, and you damned near lost a wife! Leave her alone now until she gets her strength back—understand? Leave her alone or I'll take care of you myself!"

Crouched in the darkness behind the pantry door, Ruth didn't understand—except that in some way her mother was in danger from this man she was growing to hate, and needed protection. She never forgot.

There were a great many things the neighbors didn't know about Ruth Kramer. They didn't know, for instance, that when she was fourteen she slept with a knife hidden under her pillow. Nobody knew that. Not even her mother. But Ruth had watched and guarded for a long time, and by that time the quarreling and night noises beyond the paper-thin walls had taken on a strange and ominous significance. The knife was for her fear—a nameless fear that was doomed to silence.

Anna Kramer didn't like to talk about such things.

"Forget the silly things you hear, child. It's not for you to worry about."

But Ruth wasn't a child. She was fourteen. At fourteen it seems there should be an end to misery.

"Why don't you get a divorce?" she asked.

Divorce! A shocking word. Where had she gotten such an idea? Divorce was a sin! It seemed to Ruth that perpetual unhappiness was an even greater sin, but she didn't have a chance to argue the point. The tight, thin arms were about her again, closing out the world. She mustn't think of such things. She had her school work to think about, and that scholarship—

Ruth didn't win the scholarship. She suffered a breakdown and couldn't even finish the semester; but in a way, her sickness was a good thing. It gave her time to think things out. There had to be a reason for all this unhappiness, and there had to be a way out. If only they weren't so poor. If only there was a little extra money to fix up the house and have friends and live the way other people lived. Ruth thought it all out and then put the knife back in the knife drawer because it was foolishness, even if it was a sign of rebellion. She knew a better way.

There was no trouble about going back to school. School was an extravagance and a waste on a female. Work was good. Work kept young people out of trouble.

"I went to work when I was twelve years old," Otto Kramer said. "Fifteen hours a day and a straw pallet in the back of the shop. I had no time for racing around in old cars and playing jazz records all night like young people do nowadays. Hoodlums! Nothing but hoodlums!"

Ruth didn't argue. The old cars and the jazz records weren't to be a part of her life, anyway. There was no time. Work was for days and study was for evenings, because her father was wrong about education. He was wrong about a lot of things, but she didn't argue about any of them. Arguments and quarreling were a waste of time. She learned to withdraw from them—to tune out the voices behind the wall at night, just as she tuned up the music on her bedside radio. But she always listened with half an ear, and she never forgot to watch. And she never forgot her plan. Every problem had to have a solution, and she was going to find the solution for happiness. Otto Kramer's house remained a fortress from without; but within, it began to change. The floors were carpeted, the windows curtained, a plumber installed a new sink, and the iceman didn't have to stop by after the refrigerator was delivered. The plan began to work. Anna Kramer's face learned how to smile; but Otto's remained grim.

"Foolishness! Damn foolishness! Throw money around like that and you'll be sorry!"

And just to prove his point, he lost his job and never did get around to finding another one.

It might have been then that Ruth Kramer began to hate her father; but for the next few years she was too busy to think about it. Every problem had to have a solution. She did her positive thinking and took another course at night school. After that, she got a better job with longer hours. The problem was still there, but there wasn't so much time to think about it. What was happiness, anyway? How many people ever knew? When the quarreling was especially bad, and the tears too heavy—Ruth could never bear to hear her mother cry—she could set a balance again with flowers sent as a surprise, or some new piece for the shelf of china miniatures Anna Kramer so loved. And there was always the music to be tuned up louder so the neighbors wouldn't hear. From the outside everything was lovely. Nobody ever went into the house but the three people who lived inside, enduring one another while the years piled up behind them like a stack of unpaid bills. And everything in life had to be paid for sooner or later. Far back in her mind, crowded now with more knowledge than she could ever use, Ruth knew that.

The bills began coming due when she met Allan.

She'd never thought about men. They were in her world; but they were only names on the doors of offices, or voices answering the telephone. They sat behind desks that always held a photograph of the wife and children, and they sometimes paid compliments and gave raises.

"I wish we had more employees like you, Miss Kramer. I never have to worry about how you're going to do your work."

That kind of compliment—never anything about her hair-do, which was severe and neat, or her suits, which were tailored to conceal her thinness and build up her bustline. Men were hands on desktops, voices on the telephone, and signatures on a paycheck. They were the office wolf to be ignored, the out-of-town customer to be kidded, and the serious young man who missed his mother to be gently brushed aside. And

a dour old man who now sat at home in his chair in the corner like a pile of dirty rags.

But Allan Roberts wasn't any of these things. Allan was that old bill coming due. If she'd known, she wouldn't have been so pleased when he called her into his office that first day.

"I like the way you work, Miss Kramer. You must have been with the company a long time."

A new engineer with top rating, and he'd noticed her out of the whole office staff. Ruth was flattered.

"Twelve years," she admitted, wishing, for some reason, that it didn't sound so long.

"Good. You know more about procedure than I do. You're just the assistant I need on this hotel job."

That's how it started—strictly business. But it was a big job—an important job. It meant long hours with late dinners in some hole-in-the-wall restaurant, with a juke box wailing and a lot of talk and laughter to ease the strain of a hard, tense job. It meant work on Sunday, with Allan's convertible honking at the curb, and Ruth hurrying out before he had time to come to the door. And eventually it meant talk at home.

"You're with this man an awful lot," Anna Kramer said.

"He's nice," Ruth admitted. "And smart. I'm learning a lot on this job."

"He looks nice. He dresses nice."

"He's got a responsible job. He has to dress nice."

"Your father used to dress nice. I'll never forget when I met him—silk shirt, derby hat, walking stick."

"My father?"

"Handsome, too. I remember thinking that I'd never seen such a handsome man—and such big ideas for the future."

They'd never talked like this before. Anna Kramer's eyes were far away; then they met Ruth's and changed the subject.

"I suppose you'll be working Sunday."

"I suppose I will," Ruth said.

"We'll miss church again."

"I keep telling you, you should make friends with the neighbors and go with them."

Anna sighed. Her eyes found the miniatures on the shelf.

"You know how your father feels about neighbors. I don't like to start a fuss and get you upset when we have such a nice home now."

Ruth worked Sunday. She worked many Sundays, and then, as much as she dreaded it, the job ended.

"But we're invited to the opening," Allan said. "When shall I pick you up?"

She hadn't counted on that. Working with Allan was fun. Dinner in those small cafés was fun. But a hotel opening wasn't like a concert, or a lecture, or a class at evening school.

"I suppose it's formal," she hedged.

"I hope so. You'll be a knockout in an evening gown."

He was kidding her, of course. Allan was a great kidder. Still, she didn't like to refuse. It might even jeopardize her job. She took a lunch hour for shopping, because she'd never owned an evening dress. That was when she became the last person to be aware of what had been going on under those tailored suits all the years. Allan wasn't kidding.

Cinderella went to the ball. Poor Cinderella, who was always losing things. A dance floor wasn't much good to a collector of Bach, but Allan was gallant.

"I might as well be honest," he said. "It doesn't show because I have my shoes made to order, but I've got two left feet. Let's see how the terrace looks in the moonlight."

The terrace looked the way all terraces look in the moonlight. Ruth was trembling when she pulled away from him. They hadn't taught her anything like that in night school. But she was embarrassed, too. He must have known. He could go back to the office and tell stories in the washroom about how he'd frightened that strait-laced Miss Kramer who was so efficient in so many other things.

"You live with your parents, don't you?"

She'd expected that. She didn't have to answer. She already felt alone.

"I mean, you don't have any other ties to hold you here?"

She didn't expect that.

"To hold me?"

"There's a new contract coming up in Mexico City. A big one—six months, maybe a year. I'm getting the assignment, and I'd like to have you come along. I think we work well together."

She didn't expect that at all. Mexico City. A Latin beat from the dance floor came up behind them, a deep, throbbing rhythm, and Ruth began to hear it for the first time. To hear it, and feel it, with a stirring and churning starting inside her as if something were being born.

And she could feel Allan's eyes smiling in the darkness.

"I think you'd like Mexico," he said. "I think the change will do you good. Anyway, you've got a couple of weeks to decide."

It was much after midnight when Cinderella came home from the ball. She stopped humming at the doorway and let herself in quietly, but she needn't have been so cautious. As soon as she switched on the lights, she saw her mother huddled in the wing chair.

"You didn't have to wait up—" she began, and then she saw her mother's face. "What is it? What's wrong?"

The face of a martyr taking up the cross.

"Nothing," Anna answered. "Nothing for you to worry about."

"Nothing? Then why aren't you in bed?"

Haunted eyes looked at her. A thin hand tugged at the throat of a worn robe, and the sleeve fell back to show an ugly bruise.

"Mother—!"

"Go to bed," Anna said. "You had a nice time, didn't you? Go to bed and don't worry about me."

"But you've been hurt!"

"It doesn't matter. It's happened before."

"*He* did it!"

An anger flared up as old as a knife tucked away under a pillow.

"Don't—don't talk so loud! He's asleep now."

"But you don't have to put up with this! You don't have to live with him!"

Anna's eyes swept the room. A beautiful room—perfect, like the miniatures on the shelf. The home she'd always wanted. Some plans did work.

"Maybe he's sick," Ruth said. "Maybe if he saw a doctor—"

"You know what your father thinks of doctors."

"But if he's violent—"

Anna wore a sad smile.

"I told you—it's nothing. It's happened before. You would have noticed if you weren't always so busy. He's an old man, that's all. An old man gets angry when—when he can't do what he used to do."

Anna fell silent. There was shame in her eyes for having almost spoken of the forbidden subject. She got up out of the chair and started toward the hall.

"You're not going back there?"

The sad smile came back.

"I told you—it's nothing. I shouldn't have said anything and ruined your good time. Go to bed now. It's all right. As long as I have you, everything is all right."

The arms closed about Ruth's shoulders in a good-night embrace. Nothing . . . nothing . . . Ruth turned out the lamp when she was gone and sat alone in the darkness. Nothing . . . She began to tremble.

Ruth didn't go to Mexico City. At the office her breakdown was written off to overwork on the hotel job. When she returned, Allan was gone. He never came back. For a time there was an empty place where he had been, a kind of misty pitfall with a mental sign in front of it: "Keep Away—Danger," and then the emptiness began to fill up with odds and ends of more work, more books, a course in clay modeling, and a season's ticket to the symphony. At home she played the music louder to drown out the endless quarreling, and learned not to mention separation, or a doctor, or doing anything at all.

On her thirtieth birthday, Ruth bought her first bottle of

whisky. She kept it in a closet where her mother wouldn't find it. Good people, who didn't do sinful things—such as not facing problems—didn't drink. The bottle helped on the long nights when sleep wouldn't come. A little later she dropped the modeling class because she'd lost interest in it, and the homework was cluttering up her room, and she had to stop going to the concerts because they made her nervous. But she couldn't sit around the house watching the slow death come. She drove out nights, and in time found a hole-in-the-wall bar where a three-piece combo wandered deep into the wild nowhere, and a sad singer sobbed out the woes of the shadow people, who feel no pain and dream old dreams that never come true because they live in the land of no decision.

There were objections, of course.

"I wish you wouldn't go out so much alone," Anna Kramer said, "especially at night."

Ruth laughed. She laughed a lot lately.

"Alone? How else could I go?"

The hurt look, and then—

"We used to take such nice rides on Sunday."

"I'll take you for a ride on Sunday."

"But every night—out. Honestly, I don't know what to make of you any more. You'd think I had enough trouble with your father!"

"Oh, God—!"

Then a door would slam, the music go loud, and she'd dig the bottle out of the closet.

The trouble at the office was a long time coming. It wasn't her fault. Everything cluttered, everything a mess. The youngsters were coming in—fresh and eager and green. No use trying to teach them anything. They knew it all. It got so that Ruth hardly talked to anyone except the clown in the sales department who told ribald jokes and made her laugh without knowing why. The trouble was a long time coming, but it came suddenly when it arrived. With gloves, of course. Working too hard. Too much responsibility. Not a demotion, understand, but the hours will be shorter and, of

course, the pay. Ruth understood. The strange thing was how little she cared.

She didn't go home after work. She drove around for a few hours, and then drifted back to that hole in the wall where the shadows moaned, and crouched, and waited. Now it seemed that they were waiting for her—that this was the destiny she'd been bound for all these years. This was what came of hiding behind pantry doors and trembling in the darkness with a knife under her pillow. She knew what was wrong. She couldn't bury it in the books or try to hide it in the bottom of an empty bottle any more. It crawled inside her like a worm of dread, and there was only one way to get rid of it. She ordered a double whisky to steel her nerve.

The shadow people moved about her with hungry faces. At first she'd come only to watch them; now she belonged. She had only to give the sign. They were waiting. One, in particular, a dark, dirty, unshaven man.

They went out together. They drove to a dark street—dead end. It seemed appropriate.

No preliminaries. This wasn't a high-school prom. He knew what she wanted. His mouth closed over hers, and his hands began tearing at her blouse. Ruth shuddered. The stirring that had started with Allan's kiss was churning up like an angry sea. A wall was crumbling. A high wall, a high tower—

But her hands were pushing him away.

He clawed at her, swearing softly. She pushed him back against the door.

"You crazy bitch!"

He came at her again, ugly and cruel. She saw his face dimly—unshaven, leering, smelling of liquor and filth. All of her strength went into her lunge. He fell backward against the door handle. The door opened, spilling him out in the street. She had the motor started by the time he'd scrambled to his feet. The headlights caught him for one wild moment as she backed away—an angry and bewildered man, muttering curses and fumbling at his trousers.

She drove blindly, half sobbing. When it was far enough

behind, she parked and sat alone in the darkness. The wall had started to crumble, and when a thing started it had to go on until it was done. She smashed the "Danger" sign in her mind and stared deep into the emptiness that was Allan's. Allan was gone. Allan would never come back. She'd never hear his laughter, or see the way his eyes crinkled, or feel that second kiss that had made all the difference. But the world wasn't over. There was other laughter and other eyes, and there *was* a difference! There *had* to be!

But before she could find it, there was one thing she must do. One thing for certain.

She drove home, noticing for the first time how the hedges had become shaggy and how the lawn had turned brown. There were so many things to do, and never enough time. She went into the house. Her father sat in his chair in the corner like a heap of dirty rags. Her mother looked up with anxious eyes. She hurried past them to her room. One thing she *must* do . . .

"Ruth! What are you doing? Where are you going?"

One suitcase was enough. The furniture, the lamps, the books didn't matter. Let the dead bury the dead. One suitcase and tomorrow was enough.

"Why are you packing? What's happened? What's wrong?"

No answers. No explanations. No trouble. Ruth closed the suitcase and started toward the door. They were there, both of them. The woman and the old man. Bewildered, frightened. She tried to get through the door without speaking, but they blocked the way.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"Leaving? For a trip? On business?"

"Forever," Ruth said.

"But why? What have I done?"

Tears were welling up in the woman's eyes. Ruth couldn't bear tears. She tried to push past. Her father was in the way.

"Who do you think you are?" he demanded. "You answer your mother!"

"There is no answer."

"You be careful now! You ain't so damn smart as you think. You ain't no better than us! You'll end up in the gutter like I always said!"

He shouldn't have said it—not ever, but especially not then. An ugly, dirty, unshaven old man. She looked at him and trembled, and then it started again—the shuddering, the churning inside.

"Let me go!" she gasped.

He tried to push her back into the room. He slapped her across the face, and the wall was crumbling again. She had the suitcase in her hand. She swung with all her might. She heard him go down, and then the ugly, evil face was gone. . . .

"Ruth—what have you done?"

He was on the floor—quiet and bleeding.

"Your own father! You've struck down your own father!"

Anna knelt beside him, cradling his bleeding head in her arms.

"Otto! Otto, are you alive? *Liebchen*—"

Ruth stared at them. The woman sobbing, her head bowed and her tight, thin arms, cradling him closer and closer to her breast. Her child. Her broken child caught up in the great-mother-lust, that subtle rape from which there is no escape save one . . .

And the wall was crumbling so that Ruth's breath came in great, silent sobs. When a thing started it had to be finished, one way or another. She moved slowly toward her mother.

The murmur of voices in the courtroom silenced, and everybody rose as the judge came to the bench. A handsome, dignified man graying at the temples. Stern and fatherly. He sat down, and everybody sat down. It was about to begin. Exciting. Just like in the movies.

And then a man came across the room and bent down to whisper in Mr. Jennings' ear. Mr. Jennings looked happy. He turned to Ruth.

"Good news!" he said. "Your father has regained conscious-

ness. He's ready to testify that he struck you first—that you retaliated in self-defense."

Of course, Ruth thought. *Somebody has to look after him.*

"That gives you a good chance of getting off completely. We should have little trouble proving that your mother's death was accidental. Everybody knows how devoted you were."

For just a moment Ruth felt the quick stab of panic; and then her poise returned, and she sat back quietly. The jury —only faces in a mirror. She'd never let them acquit her. Nobody was going to send her back to that house now that she'd made her decision.

FLETCHER FLORA

THIS SEEMS TO BE an excellent opportunity to end forevermore the two persistent rumors that revolve around Fletcher Flora, whose stories are written in the town of Leavenworth, Kansas. He is not, despite the unusual name, a girl named Flora Fletcher; he is a guy, and that is his real name. And despite his location, he is a legitimate and unfettered citizen; he is not a resident of Leavenworth's famous bastille. No rumor, of course, is the ever-growing popularity of Flora's diamond-hard stories, and here is one of his best.

The Collector Comes After Payday

FRANKIE LOOKED THROUGH a lot of bars before he found the old man. He was sitting in a booth in a joint on lower Market Street with a dame Frankie didn't know. They were both sitting on the same side of the booth, and Frankie could see that they were plastered together like a couple of strips of Scotch tape.

"Come on home, Pop," Frankie said. "You come on home."

The woman looked up at him, and her lips twisted in a scarlet sneer. The scarlet was smeared on the lips, as if she'd been doing a lot of kissing, and the lips had a kind of bruised and swollen look, as if the kisses had been pretty enthusiastic.

"Go to hell away, sonny," she said.

She lifted her martini glass by its thin stem and tilted it against her mouth. Frankie reached across the booth in front of the old man and slapped the glass out of her hand. It shivered with a thin, musical sound against the wall, and

gin and vermouth splashed down her low-cut dress. The olive bounced on the table and rolled off.

The woman raised up as far as she could in the cramped booth, her eyes hot and smoky with gin and rage.

"You little punk," she said softly.

Frankie grabbed her by a wrist and twisted the skin around on the bone.

"Leave Pop alone," he said. "You quit acting like a tramp and leave him alone."

Then the old man hacked down on Frankie's arm with the horny edge of his hand. It was like getting hit with a dull hatchet. Frankie's fingers went numb, dropping away from the woman's wrist, and he swung sideways with his left hand at the old man's face. The old man caught the fist in a big palm and gave Frankie a hard shove backward.

"Blow, sonny," he said.

For a guy not young at all, he was plenty tough. His eyes were like two yellow agates, and his mouth was a thin, cruel trap under a bold nose. From the way his body behaved, it was obvious that he still had good muscular coordination. He was poised, balanced like a trained fighter.

Frankie saw everything in a kind of pink, billowing mist. He moved back up to the booth with his fists clenched, and in spite of everything he could do, tears of fury and frustration spilled out of his eyes and streaked his cheeks.

"You get the hell out of this," he said. "You ought to be ashamed, drinking and playing around this way."

The old man slipped out of the booth, quick as a snake, and chopped Frankie in the mouth with a short right that traveled straight as a piston. Frankie hit the floor and rolled over, spitting a tooth and blood. He was crazy. Getting up, he staggered back at the old man, cursing and sobbing and swinging like a girl. This time the old man set him up with a left jab and threw a bomb. Frankie went over backward like a post, his head smacking with a wet, rotten sound.

No one bothered about him. Except to laugh, that is. Lying there on the floor, he could hear the laughter rise and diminish and rise again. It was the final and utter degradation of a

guy who'd never had much dignity to start with. Rolling over and struggling up to his hands and knees, he was violently sick, his stomach contracting and expanding in harsh spasms. After a long time, he got the rest of the way to his feet in slow, agonizing stages. His chin and shirt front were foul with blood and spittle.

In the booth, ignoring him, the old man and the woman were in a hot clinch, their mouths adhering in mutual suction. Turning away, Frankie went out. The floor kept tilting up under his feet and then dropping suddenly away. All around him, he could hear the ribald laughter.

2.

It was six blocks to the place where he'd parked his old Plymouth. He walked slowly along the littered, narrow street, hugging the dark buildings, the night air a knife in his lungs. Now and then he stopped to lean against solid brick until the erratic pavement leveled off and held still. Once, at the mouth of an alley, he was sick again, bringing up a thin, bitter fluid into his mouth.

It took him almost an hour to get back to the shabby walkup apartment that was the best a guy with no luck could manage. In the bathroom he splashed cold water on his face, gasping with pain. The smoky mirror above the lavatory distorted his face, exaggerating the ugliness of smashed, swollen lips drawn back from bloody gums. He patted his face dry with a towel and poured himself a double shot in the living room. He tossed the whisky far back into his mouth beyond his raw lips, gagging and choking from the sudden fiery wash in his throat.

Dropping into a chair, he began to think. Not with any conscious direction. His mind functioned, with everything coming now to a bad end, in a kind of numb and lucid detachment. Suddenly he was strangely indifferent. Nothing had happened, after all, that couldn't have been anticipated by a guy with no luck whatever.

It was funny the way he was no longer very concerned about anything. Sitting there in the drab living room, in the dull immunity to shame that comes from the ultimate humiliation, he found his mind working itself back at random to the early days at home with the old man. Back to the days when his mother, a beaten nonentity, had been alive. Not a lovable character, the old man. Not easy on wife or kid. A harsh meter of stern discipline for all delinquencies but his own. A master of the deferred-payment technique. In the old days, when Frankie was a kid at home, wrongdoing had never been met with swift and unconsidered punishment that would have been as quickly forgotten. The old man had remarked and remembered. Later, often after Frankie had completely forgotten the adolescent evil he'd committed, there was sure to be something that he wanted very much to do. Then the old man would look at him with skimmed-milk eyes and say, "No. Have you forgotten the offense for which you haven't paid? For that, you cannot do this thing."

Wait till it really hurts. That had been the old man's way.

Remembering, Frankie laughed softly, air hissing with no inflection of humor through the hole where his lost tooth had been. No luck. Never any luck. He'd even been a loser in drawing an old man—a bastard with a memory like an elephant and a perverted set of values.

The laughter hurt Frankie's mangled lips, and he cut it off, sitting slumped in the chair with his eyes in a dead focus on the floor. It was really very strange the way he felt. Not tired. Not sleepy. Not much of anything. Just sort of released and out of it, like a religious queer staring at his belly button.

He was still sitting there at three o'clock in the morning when the old man came in. He was sloppy drunk, and the lines of his face had blurred, letting his features run together in a kind of soft smear. His eyes were rheumy infections in the smear, and his mouth still wore enough of the cheap lipstick to give him the appearance of wearing a grotesque clown's mask. He stood, swaying, almost helpless, with his legs spread wide and his hands on his hips in a posture of

defiance, and Frankie looked back at him from his chair. It made him sick to see the old man so ugly, satiety in his flaccid face and the nauseous perfume of juniper berries like a fog around him.

The old man spit and laughed hoarsely. The saliva landed on the toe of Frankie's shoe, a milky blob. Without moving, Frankie watched the old man weave into the bedroom with erratic manipulation of legs and hips.

Frankie kept on sitting in the chair for perhaps five minutes longer, then he sighed and got up and walked into the bedroom after the old man. The old man was standing in the middle of the room in his underwear. His legs were corded with swollen blue veins that bulged the fish-belly skin. On the right thigh there was an angry red spot that would probably blacken. When he saw Frankie watching him, his rheumy eyes went hot with scorn.

"My son," he said. "My precious son, Frankie."

Frankie didn't answer. As he moved toward the old man slowly, smiling faintly, the pain of the smile on his mangled lips was a pale reflection of the dull pain in his heart. He had almost closed the distance between them before the old man's gin-soaked brain understood that Frankie was going to kill him. And he was too drunk now to defend himself, even against Frankie. The scorn faded from his eyes, and terror flooded in, cold and incredulous.

"No, Frankie," he whispered. "For God's sake, no."

Frankie still didn't say anything, and the old man tried to back away, but by that time it was too late, and Frankie's thumbs were buried in his throat. His tongue came out, his legs beat in a hellish threshing, and his fists battered wildly at Frankie's face. But it did no good, for Frankie was feeling very strong. He was feeling stronger than he had ever felt in his life before. And good, too. A powerful, surging sense of well-being. A wild, singing exhilaration that increased in ratio to the pressure of his grip.

3.

The old man had been dead for minutes when Frankie finally let him go. He slipped down to the floor in a limp huddle of old flesh and fabric, and Frankie stood looking down at him, the narcoticlike pleasure draining out of him and leaving him again with that odd, incongruous feeling of detachment.

He realized, of course, that the end was his as much as the old man's. It was the end for both of them. Recalling the .38 revolver on a shelf in the closet, he considered for a moment the idea of suicide, but not very seriously. Not that he was repelled by the thought of death. It was just that he didn't quite have the guts.

He supposed that he should call the police, and he went so far as to turn away toward the living room and the telephone. Then he stopped, struck by an idea that captured his fancy. He saw himself walking into the precinct station with the old man's body in his arms. He heard himself saying quietly, "This is my father. I've just killed him." Drab little Frankie, no-luck Frankie, having in the end his moment of dramatic ascendancy. It was a prospect that fed an old and functional hunger of his soul, and he turned back, looking at the body on the floor. Smiling dreamily with his thick lips, he felt within himself a rebirth of that singing exhilaration.

At the last moment he found in himself a sick horror that made it impossible for him to bear excessive contact with the dead flesh, so he dressed the body, struggling with uncooperative arms and legs. After that it was so easy. It was so crazy easy. If he'd given a damn, if he'd really been trying to get away with it, he could never have pulled it off in a million years.

With the old man dead in his arms, he walked out of the apartment and down the stairs and across the walk to the Plymouth at the curb. He opened the front door and put him in the seat and closed the door again. Then, standing there

beside the car, he looked around and saw that there was no one in sight. So far as he knew, not a soul had seen him.

It was then that the enormity of the thing struck him, and he began to laugh softly, hysteria threading the laughter. No-luck Frankie doing a thing like that. No-luck Frankie himself just walking out of an apartment house with a corpse in his arms and not a damned soul the wiser. You couldn't get life any crazier than that. He kept on laughing, clutching the handle of the car door with one hand, his body shaking and his lips cracking open again to let a thin red line trace its way down his chin.

After a while he choked off the laughter on a series of throaty little gasps that tore painfully at his throat. Lighting a cigarette, he went around the car and got in beside the old man on the driver's side.

He drove at a moderate rate of speed, savoring morbidly the approach to his big scene. Now, in the process of execution, the drama of it gained even more in its appeal to him. It gave him a kind of satisfaction he had never known.

He was driving east on Mason Street. The side streets on the south descended to their intersections by steep grades. Possessing the right-of-way, he crossed the intersections without looking, absorbed in his thoughts. For that reason he neither saw nor heard the transport van until it was too late. At the last instant he heard the shrill screaming of rubber on concrete and looked up and right to see the tremendous steel monster roaring down upon him.

His own scream cut across the complaint of giant tires, and he hurled himself away reflexively, striking the door with a shoulder and clawing at the handle. The door burst open at the precise instant of impact, and he was catapulted through the air like a flapping doll. Striking the pavement, he rolled over and over, protecting his head with his arms instinctively. The overwhelming crash of the Plymouth crumpling under the van was modified in his ears by the fading of consciousness.

On his back, he lay quietly and was aware of smaller sounds—distant screams, pounding feet, horrified voices, and

after a bit, the faraway whine of sirens growing steadily nearer and louder.

Someone knelt beside him, felt his pulse, said in manifest incredulity, "This guy's hardly scratched. It's a God-damned miracle."

A voice, more distant, rising on the threat of hysteria, "Christ! This one's hamburger. Nothing but hamburger."

And he continued to lie there in the screaming night with the laughter coming back and the wild wonder growing. What was it? What in God's name was it? A guy who'd started and ended with a sour bastard of an old man and never any luck between. A guy who'd had it all, and most of it bad. A guy like that getting, all of a sudden, two fantastic breaks you wouldn't have believed could happen. Walking out of a house with a body in his arms, scot-free and away. Surviving with no more than a few bruises a smashup that should have smeared him for keeps. Maybe it was because he'd quit caring. Maybe the tide turns when you no longer give a damn.

Then, in a sudden comprehensive flash, the full significance of the situation struck him. Hamburger, someone had said. Nothing but hamburger. Thanks to the cockeyed collaboration of the gods and a truck driver, *he had disposed of the old man in a manner above suspicion.* He lay on the pavement with the wonder of it still growing and growing, and his insides shook with delirious internal laughter.

4.

In time he rode a litter to an ambulance, and the ambulance to a hospital. He slept like a child in antiseptic cleanliness between cool sheets, and in the morning he had pictures taken of his head. Twenty-four hours later he was told that there was no concussion, and released. With the most sympathetic cooperation of officials, he collected the old man at the morgue and transferred him to a crematory.

When he left the crematory, he took the old man with him in an urn. In the apartment he set the urn on a table in the

living room and stood looking at it. He had developed for the old man, since the smash-up, a feeling of warm affection. In his heart there was no hard feeling, no lingering animosity. He found his parent in his present state, a handful of ashes, considerably more lovable than he had ever found him before. Besides, he had brought Frankie luck. In the end, in shame and violence and blood, he had brought him the luck he had never had.

Putting the old man away on a shelf in the closet, Frankie checked his finances and found that he could assemble forty dollars. He fingered the green stuff and considered possibilities. Eagerness to ride his luck had assumed the force of compulsion. In the saddle, he left the apartment and went over to Nick Loemke's bar on Market Street.

He found Nick in a lull, polishing glass behind the mahogany. Nick examined him sleepily and made a swipe at the bar with his towel.

"What's on your mind, Frankie?"

"Double shot of rye," Frankie said.

His lips and gums were still a little raw, so he took it easy with the rye, tossing it in short swallows on the back of his tongue.

"Where's Joe Tonty anchored this week?" he asked.

"What the hell do you care, Frankie? You can't afford to operate in that class."

"You never know. You never know until you try."

Frankie finished his rye and spun the glass off his fingertips across the bar. It hit the trough on the inside edge and hopped up into the air. Nick had to grab it in a hurry to keep it from going off onto the floor. He glared at Frankie and doused the glass in the antiseptic solution under the bar.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Frankie? You lost your marbles?"

"Okay, okay," Frankie said. "I ask for information and you give me lip. You going to tell me where Tonty's anchored, or aren't you?"

Nick shrugged. "All right, sucker. It's your lettuce. Over on Third Street. Upstairs over the old Bonfile garage."

Frankie dropped a skin on the bar and went out. Between Third and Fourth, he navigated a narrow, cluttered alley to the rear of the Bonfile garage and climbed a flight of iron, exterior stairs to a plank door that was locked. He pounded on the door with the meaty heel of his fist and got the response of a crack with an eye and a voice behind it.

The voice said, "Hello, Frankie. What the hell you doing here?"

"This where Tonty's anchored?"

"That's right."

"Then what the hell you think I'm doing here? You want me to spell it out for you?"

The crack widened to reveal a flat face split in a grin between thick ears. "My, my. We're riding high tonight, ain't we?"

"You want my money or not?"

The crack spread still wider, and the grinning gorilla shuffled back out of it. "Sure, Frankie, sure. Every little bit helps."

Frankie went in past the gorilla and down the long cement-floored room to the craps table. It was still early, and the big stuff wasn't moving yet. Just right for forty bucks. Or thirty-nine, deducting a double shot.

Frankie got his belly against the edge of the table and laid a fast side bet that the point would come.

It came.

He laid three more in a hurry, betting the accumulation and mixing them pro and con without thinking much about it.

The points came or not, just as Frankie bet them.

When the dice came around to him, he was fat, and he laid the bundle. He tossed a seven, made his point twice, and tossed another seven, letting the bundle grow. Then, playing a hunch without benefit of thought, he drew most of the bundle off the table.

He crapped out and passed the dice.

Across the table, Joe Tonty's face was a slab of gray rock.

His eyes flicked over Frankie, and his shoulders twitched in a shrug.

"Your luck's running, Frankie. You better ride it."

"Sure," Frankie said. "I'll ride."

It kept running for two hours, and Frankie rode it all the way. When he finally had a sudden flat feeling, a kind of interior collapse, he pulled out. Not that he felt his luck had quit running for keeps. Just resting. Just taking a breather. He descended the iron steps into the alley and crossed over to Market for a nightcap at Nick's. A little later, in the living room of the apartment, he counted eight grand. It was hard to believe, little Frankie with eight big grand all at once and all his own. Not even any withholding tax.

He was shaken again by the silent delirium that was becoming an integral element of his chronic mood, and he went over to the closet and opened the door, looking up at the old man in his urn.

"Thanks, Pop," he said. "Thanks."

5.

He slept soundly and got up about noon. After a hearty lunch he went out to the track with the eight grand in his pocket. He was in time for the second race, and he checked the entries. But he didn't feel anything, so he let it go.

Checking the entries in the third, he still didn't get any nudge. Something seemed to be getting in the way, coming between him and his luck. Maybe, he realized suddenly, it was the warm pressure of a long flank against his.

He turned, looking into brown eyes that were as warm as the touch of flank. Under the eyes there was a flash of white in a margin of red, and above them, a heavy sheen of pale yellow with streaks of off-white running through it. At first Frankie thought she'd just been sloppy with a dye job, but then he saw that the two-toned effect was natural.

"Crowded, isn't it?" she said.

Frankie grinned. "I like crowds."

He was trying to think of what the hair reminded him of

when he got the nudge. His eyes popped down to the program in his hands and back up to the dame. Inside, he'd gone breathless and tense, the way a guy does when he's on the verge of something big.

"What's your name, baby?"

The red-and-white smile flashed again. "Call me Taffy. Because of my hair, you see."

He saw, all right. He saw a hell of a lot more than she thought he did. He saw number four in the third, and the name was Taffy Candy. One would bring ten if Taffy won, and even Frankie, who was no mental giant, could add another cipher to eight thousand and read the result.

Don't give yourself time to think, that was the trick. If you start thinking, you start figuring odds and consequences, and you're a dead duck. He stood up and slapped the program against his leg.

"Hold a spot for me, baby. If I'm on the beam, it'll be a big day for you and me and a horse."

He hit the window just before closing time and laid the eight grand on Taffy's nose. At the rail of the track, he watched the horses run, and he wasn't surprised, not even excited, when Taffy came in by the nose that had his eight grand on it. It was astonishing how quickly he was becoming accustomed to good fortune. He was already anticipating the breaks as if he'd had them forever. As if they were a natural right.

Like that girl in the stands, for instance. The girl who called herself Taffy. Standing there by the rail, he thought with glandular stirrings of the warm pressure of flank, the strangely alluring two-toned pastel hair, the brown eyes and scarlet smile. A few days ago, he wouldn't have given himself a chance with a dame like that. He'd have taken it out in thinking. But now it was different. Luck and a few grand made a hell of a difference. The difference between thinking and acting.

With eight times ten in his pocket, he went back to the stands. Climbing up to her level with his eyes full of nylon,

he grinned and said, "We all came in, baby, you and me and the horse. Let's move out of here."

She strained a mocking look through incredible lashes. "I've already got a date, honey. I'm supposed to meet a guy here."

"To hell with him."

Her eyebrows arched their plucked backs, and a practiced tease showed through the lashes. "What makes you think I'd just walk off with you, mister?"

Frankie dug into his pocket for enough green to make an impression. The bills were crisp. They made small ticking sounds when he flipped them with a thumbnail.

"This, maybe," he said.

She eyed the persuasion and stood up. "That's good thinking, honey," she said.

6.

A long time and a lot of places later, Frankie awoke to the gray light that filtered into his shabby apartment. It was depressing, he thought, to awaken in a dump like this. It was something that had to be changed.

"Look, baby," he said. "Today we shop for another place. A big place uptown. Carpets up to your knees, foam-rubber stuff, the works. How about it, baby?"

Beside him, Taffy pressed closer, her lips moving against his naked shoulder with a sleepy animal purr of contentment.

So that day they rented the uptown place, and moved in, and a couple of months later Frankie bought the Circle Club.

The club was a nice little spot tucked into a so-so block just outside the perimeter of the big-time glitter area. It was a good location for a brisk trade with the right guy handling it. The current owner was being pressed for the payment of debts by parties who didn't like waiting, and Frankie bought him out for a song.

It was a swell break. Just one more in a long line. Frankie shot a wad on fancy trimmings, and booked a combination that could really jump. With the combo there was a sleek canary who had something for the eyes as well as the ears.

The food and the liquor were fair, which is all anyone expects in a night spot, and up to the time of Linda Lee, business was good.

After Linda Lee, business was more than good. It was booming. The word always goes out on a gal like Linda. The guys come in with their dames, and after they've had the quota of looking that the tariff buys, they go someplace and turn off the lights and pretend that the dames are Linda.

Linda Lee wasn't her real name, of course, but it suited her looks and her business. Ostensibly the business was dancing. Actually it was taking off her clothes. In Linda's case that was sufficient. As for the looks, they were Linda's, and they were something. Dusky skin and eyes on the slant. Black hair with blue highlights, soft and shining, brushing her shoulders and slashing across her forehead in bangs above perfect unplucked brows. A lithe, vibrant body with an upswept effect that a guy couldn't believe from seeing and so had to keep coming back for another look to convince himself.

She sent Frankie. At first, the day she came into his office at the Circle Club looking for a job, he didn't see anything but a looker in a town that was littered with them. That was when she still had her clothes on.

He rocked back in his swivel and stared across his desk at her through the thin, lifting smoke from his cigarette.

"You a dancer, you say?"

"Yes."

"A good one?"

"Not very."

That surprised Frankie. He took his cigarette out of his mouth and let his eyes make a brief tour of her points of interest.

"No? What else you got that a guy would pay to see?"

She showed him what she had. Frankie sat there watching her emerge slowly from her clothes, and the small office got steadily smaller, so hot that it was almost suffocating. Frankie's knitted tie was hemp instead of silk, and the knot was a hangman's knot, cutting deeply into his throat until he

was breathing in labored gasps. The palms of his hands dripped salty water. His whole body was wet with sweat.

When he was able to speak, he said, "Who the hell's going to care about the dancing? Can you start tonight?"

She could and did. And so did Frankie. For a guy with a temperature as high as his, he played it pretty cool. He kept the pressure on her, all right, but he didn't force it. Not that he was too good for it. It just wasn't practical. The threat of being fired doesn't mean much to a gal with a dozen other places to go. By the time Frankie was desperate enough for threats, he was having to raise her pay every second week to hang on to her.

She liked him, though. He knew damned well she liked him. He could tell by the way the heat came up in her slanted eyes when she looked at him. He could tell by the way her hands sometimes reached out for him, touching him lightly, straying with brief abandon. But she was like mercury. He couldn't hold her when he reached back.

7.

The night he decided to try mink, he came into the club late, just as Linda was moving onto the small circular floor in a blue spot. He stood for a minute against the wall, holding the long cardboard box under his arm, watching the emerging dusky body, his pulse matching the tropical tempo of drums in the darkness. Before the act was over, he moved on around the edge of the floor and back to the door of Linda's room.

Inside, he lay the box on the dressing table and sat down. Waiting, he could hear faintly the crescendo of drums and muted brass that indicated Linda's exit. The sound of her footsteps in the hall was lost in the surge of applause that continued long after she had left the floor.

She closed the door behind her and stood leaning against it, head back and eyes shining, her breasts rising and falling in deep, rhythmic breathing. Light and shadow stressed the convexities and hollows of her body.

"Hello, Frankie," she said. "Nice surprise."

He stood up, pulses hammering. "Nicer than you think, baby. I've brought you something."

She saw the box behind him on the dressing table and moved toward it, flat muscles rippling with silken smoothness beneath dusky skin. Her exclamation was like a delighted child's.

"Tell me what it is."

"Open it, baby."

Her fingers worked deftly at the knot of the cord, lifted the top of the box away. Without speaking, she shook out the luxurious fur coat, slipped into it, and hugged it around her body. She stood entranced, her back to Frankie, looking at her reflection in the dim depths of the mirror.

Closing in behind her, he took her shoulders in his hands. Capturing the hands in hers, she pulled them around her body and under the coat. Her head fell back onto his shoulder. Her breath sighed through parted lips. He could feel in his hands the vibrations of her shivering flesh.

She said sleepily, "You're a sweet guy, Frankie. A lucky guy, too. You're going places. Too bad I can't go along."

"Why not, baby? Why not go along?"

Her head rolled on his shoulder, her lips burning his neck. "Look, Frankie. When I go for a ride, I go first-class. No cheap tourist accommodations for Linda."

"I don't get you, baby. You call mink cheap?"

"It's not the mink. It's being second. It's the idea of taking what's left over."

"You mean Taffy?"

She closed her eyes and said nothing, and Frankie laughed softly. "Taffy's expendable, baby. Strictly expendable."

"Just like that? Maybe she won't let go."

"How the hell can she help it?"

"She's legal. That always helps."

"Married? You think Taffy and I are married?" He laughed again, his shoulders shaking with it. "Taffy and I are temporary, baby. I never figured it any other way. Nothing on paper. All off the record. We last just as long as I want us to."

She twisted against him, her arms coming up around his neck. Her breath was in his mouth.

"How long, Frankie? How long do you want?"

His hand moved down the soft curve of her spine, drawing her in. He said hoarsely, "As far as Taffy's concerned, I quit wanting when I saw you. Tonight I'll make it official."

She put her mouth over his, and he felt the hot, flicking of her tongue. Then she pushed away violently, staggering back against the dressing table. The mink hung open from her shoulders.

"Afterward, Frankie," she whispered. "Afterward."

He stood there blind, everything dissolved in shimmering waves of heat. At last, sight returning, he laughed shakily and moved to the door. Hand on the knob, he looked back at her.

"Like you say, baby—afterward."

8.

He went out into the hall and through the rear door into the alley. There was a small area back there in which he kept his convertible Caddy tucked away. Long, sleek, ice-blue and glittering chrome. A long way from the old Plymouth.

Behind the wheel, sending the big machine singing through the streets, he felt the tremendous uplift that comes to a man who approaches a crisis with assurance of triumph. His emotional drive was in harmony with the leashed power of the Caddy's throbbing engine. Wearing his new personality, he could hardly remember the old Frankie. It was impossible to believe that he had once, not long ago, been driven by shame to a longing for death. Life was good. All it required was luck and guts. With luck and guts, a guy could do anything. A guy could live forever.

At the uptown apartment house, he ascended in the swift, whispering elevator and let himself into his living room with the key he carried. The living room itself was dark, but light sliced into the darkness from the partially open door of the

bedroom. Silently he crossed the carpet that wasn't actually quite up to his knees and pushed the bedroom door all the way open.

Taffy was reading in bed. Her sheer nylon gown kept nothing hidden, but what showed was nothing Frankie hadn't seen before, and he was tired of it. He stood for a moment looking at her, wondering what would be the best way to do it. The direct way, he decided. The tough way. Get it over with, and to hell with it.

From the bed, Taffy said, "Hi, honey. You're early tonight."

Without answering, Frankie walked over to the closet and slammed back one of the sliding panels. He dragged a cowhide overnight bag off a shelf and carried it to the bed. Snapping the locks, he spread the bag open.

Taffy sat up straighter against her silk pillows, two small spots of color burning suddenly over her cheekbones. "What's up, Frankie? You going someplace?"

He went to a chest of drawers, returned with pajamas and a clean shirt. "That ought to be obvious. As a matter of fact, I'm going to a hotel."

"Why, Frankie? What's the idea?"

He looked down at her, feeling the strong emotional drive. "The idea is that we're through, baby. Finished. I'm moving out."

Her breath whistled in a sharp, sucking inhalation, and she swung out of bed in a fragile nylon mist. Her hands clutched at him.

"No, Frankie! Not like this. Not after all the luck I've brought you."

He laughed brutally, remembering the old man. "It wasn't you who brought me luck, baby. It was someone else. That's something you'll never know anything about."

He turned, heading for the chest again, and she grabbed his arm, jerking. He spun with the force of the jerk, smashing his backhand across her mouth. She staggered off until the underside of her knees caught on the bed and held her steady. A bright drop of blood formed on her lower lip and dropped

onto her chin. A whimper of pain crawled out of her throat.

"Why, Frankie? Just tell me why."

He shrugged. "A guy grows. A guy goes on to something better. That's just the way it is, baby."

"It's more than that. It's a lot bigger than that. You think I've been two-timing you, Frankie?"

He repeated his brutal laugh. "Two-timing me? I'll tell you something, baby. I wouldn't give a damn if you were sleeping with every punk in town. That's how much I care." He paused, savoring sadism, finding it pleasant. "You want it straight, baby? It's just that I'm sick of you. I'm sick to my guts with the sight of you. That clear enough?"

She came back to him, slowly, lifting her arms like a supplicant. He waited until she was close enough, then he hit her across the mouth again

Turning his back, he returned to the chest and got the rest of the articles he needed. Just a few things. Enough for the night and tomorrow In the morning he'd send someone around to clean things out.

At the bed he tossed the stuff into the overnight bag and snapped it shut.

Over his shoulder he said, "The rent's paid to the end of the month. After that you better look for another place to live."

She didn't respond, and remembering his toothbrush, he went into the bathroom for it. When he came out she was standing there with a .38 in her hand. It was the same .38 he'd once considered killing himself with. That had been the old Frankie, of course.

Not the new Frankie. Death was no consideration in the life of the new Frankie.

"You rotten son of a bitch," she said.

He laughed aloud and started for her, and he just couldn't believe it when the slug slammed into his shoulder.

He looked down in amazement at the place where the crimson began to seep, and his incredulous eyes raised just in time to receive the second slug squarely between them.

And like the night the old man died, it was funny. In the last split second of sight, it wasn't Taffy standing there with the gun at all. It was the old man again.

The old man with a memory like an elephant.

The old man who always waited until it really hurt.

JACK RITCHIE

"TRY IT MY WAY" is the tense story of three cons in a near-hopeless prison break, and of their wavering surrender and murder—a shocker from the typewriter of a new writer who already ranks among the best.

Try It My Way

AT FOUR O'CLOCK they thought of shutting off the water. I took the half-filled saucepan out of the sink and poured it into one of the big cookpots lined up on the floor.

Keegan stopped fooling with the automatic long enough to pour me a glass of vanilla extract from the quart bottle.

I took a couple of swallows and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. Then I pulled the bill of the guard cap lower and walked to the other end of the kitchen.

They were both in their underwear. Brock sat cross-legged, staring at the backs of his big hands without interest, and Stevens hugged his legs tight to his chest, his eyes trying not to look up at me.

I grinned. "Here we got two types," I said. "Notice the nice gray hair, the clear healthy skin, and them baby-blue eyes on Stevens."

Turk was at the big window keeping an eye on the exercise yard. He turned his head. "A real nice grandpop. I remember the twinkle in his eye when he used his stick on my kidneys."

"Watch this, Turk," I said. I reached down and put my hand on Stevens' shoulder. He shrank away and began trembling.

Turk laughed. "That's good to see. I'm glad I lived so long."

"Stevens is remembering all the little things he used to do to make life interesting for us," I said. "And now he's scared silly that we got better imaginations."

I shifted my smile to Brock. "Now, this here boy's got no

imagination at all. He's got free hand, but he can't think of the clever things like Stevens can."

Brock met my eyes. "I'm thinking of some now, Gomez."

I grinned at him a long time, and then I went to the window.

The guards were in a straggling arc around the three sides of the mess-hall wing. Some of them were standing, but most were taking it easy, hunkered on their heels and waiting for the warden to think of something.

I went back to my chair. "Keegan," I said, "I'll tell you about Davis. You're too young in here to remember him."

I lit a cigarette and exhaled smoke. "Davis was afraid of cats. Crazy afraid about them, and everybody knew it. And one day he made the mistake of using unrespectful words to Stevens, and he got tossed into the hole."

I put my feet on the table. "Davis had one peaceful day, and then he began screaming. Real interesting screaming, and it was all about how there was a cat in the hole with him."

Keegan took the clip out of the automatic and examined it.

"After a couple of hours Davis suddenly didn't make any more noise. When somebody bothered to wonder about that and take a look, he found Davis had beat his brains out against the wall."

I looked at Stevens. "In one of the corners was a black-as-spades cat licking his paws. Now, I wonder how he could of got in there."

Turk turned away from the window. "The warden's waving a hanky, and he's coming around to the main door."

Keegan got up and went into the dining hall, and I could hear his footsteps as he made his way through the emptiness of it. He began moving some of the tables and benches away from the double doors.

There would be guards in the corridor, but they wouldn't try to force their way in as long as we had Brock and Stevens with us.

In five minutes Keegan returned with Warden Cramer.

Cramer's eyes went to Brock and Stevens.

"They're doing just fine, Warden," I said. "But they might be a little chilly."

His eyes moved to the uniform I was wearing, and his mouth tightened. "This isn't going to get you anywhere, Gomez," he said.

"Tell us what we got to lose, Warden," I said. "I'm the short-timer here, and I got ninety years to wait."

He shifted his attention to Keegan. "For one thing, you got your lives to lose if anything happens to Brock or Stevens."

Keegan sipped his glass of extract and smiled at him.

"All right," Cramer snapped. "Let's have what you expect from me."

"A nice fast car and an open gate," Keegan said.

The warden's eyes were hard. "It wouldn't do you much good. You couldn't get far."

"We'll have Brock and Stevens along to show us the way," Keegan said. "Something clever should come to us when it gets dark."

Cramer walked over to Stevens and Brock. "They haven't tried anything rough on you, have they?"

"Just words," Brock said.

Cramer came back to us. "You have one hour to give this up."

I smiled. "And if we don't, Warden? Are you going to try what you haven't got nerve enough to do now?"

Cramer's face colored angrily.

"Remember," I said. "Keep it quiet and orderly out there. If you come for us, start thinking of words to use for Stevens' widow."

Keegan took the warden back out, and while he was gone I searched through the kitchen drawers until I found a whetstone. I began sharpening the nine-inch meat knife I carried.

When Keegan came back, he refilled our glasses.

Brock uncrossed his legs and rubbed circulation back into them. "Before that stuff goes to your head, Keegan, do some thinking. If Cramer lets you three get away with this, there won't be a guard safe in the country. He's not going to let that happen."

"Start hoping you're wrong," Turk said. "Work on it real hard."

I got to my feet and went over to Stevens. "Maybe I should cut off a few ears and toss them out into the yard for Cramer to admire. It might impress him that we mean business."

I got down on one knee in front of him. "Whose ears should it be, Stevens? Yours or Brock's?"

Stevens licked his lips and tried to look away, but his eyes came back to the knife in my hand.

I grabbed a handful of his hair and jerked his head back. I put the tip of my knife under his jaw. "You got two seconds to make up your mind."

His voice was the strangled whisper of terror. "Brock. Make it Brock."

I let go of him and stood up. "See, Brock," I said. "He wants his ears real bad. He don't love you at all when it comes to that."

Keegan was watching me. "Did you get your thrill, Gomez?"

"Sure," I said. "I got a mean streak in me, and it has to be fed."

Keegan lighted one of the cigars we'd found in Brock's uniform and took Turk's place at the window.

I went back to the table and sat down. "With Davis it was cats," I said. "With some people it's the dark or maybe high places."

I watched Turk pouring himself a drink. "I'm thinking of the time the drier in the laundry flared up," I said. "Just a short in the wiring and nothing to get excited about. Remember the size of Stevens' eyes when he thought he might get burned?"

I picked up a pack of book matches and lit one. I let it burn low, and Turk watched it. When I blew it out, Turk took the pack and went over to Stevens.

Turk stood there grinning, and then he tore one of the matches out of the pack and lit it.

Stevens' eyes got wide, and he backed away as he watched it burn.

"Let him alone, Turk," Keegan said from the window.

"All I want is a little fun," Turk said. "I got it coming."

Keegan came away from the window. "I just told you something, Turk."

Turk met his eyes for a few moments, and then he shrugged and walked away.

"Gomez, the idea man, and Turk, the pupil," Brock said. "You got nice company, Keegan."

"Stevens is with you," Keegan said. "Want to brag about him?"

Five o'clock passed and nothing happened. I relieved Keegan at the window and waved to the photographers who were behind the line of guards taking pictures.

The warden finished talking to a knot of reporters, and then he started through the guards.

"Cramer's coming back," I said. "And he hasn't got a car under his arm."

Keegan left to let him in. When he came back with the warden, they took seats at the table.

"Well?" Keegan asked.

"You might as well quit this before somebody gets hurt," Cramer said. "You're not getting out of here and that's that."

"We're stubborn and we think different," Keegan said. He glanced at the wrist watch he'd taken from Brock. "We're not going to drag this out until there's snow in hell. It's ten after five right now. We'll give you until seven."

"It's out of my hands," Cramer said. "I talked to the governor, and he says positively nothing doing."

"You got almost two hours to change his mind," I said.

"You know what will happen if you let anything happen to Brock or Stevens. You'll all be held equally responsible." Cramer's eyes went around the three of us and settled on Keegan. "You got sense enough to know that this won't work."

Keegan smiled thinly. "I'm the outdoor type, and I been in here six years. Don't count on me being able to think clear."

The warden got up. "Seven o'clock is going to come and go. It's not any special time on my clock."

He looked at the pots of water. "We can wait a long time out there. Longer than that will last."

When he was gone, Keegan sat at the table slowly smoking his cigar. It was quiet except for the sounds the guards made as they talked to each other in the yard.

At six Turk took my place at the window. I refilled my glass and lit a cigarette. "Cramer's got the notion that we don't have the guts to do like we say. I vote to build a fire under Stevens. He should get loud enough for even the governor to hear."

I let a whole book of matches flare up and tossed it at Stevens.

He shrieked as he skittered away from it. His face got pasty white and twitched with fright as he crouched in the corner watching me.

Keegan got up. "I thought I said words about doing things like that."

I glanced up. "Not to me."

"You're getting told now."

I looked at the bigness of his shoulders and the way his hands hung, ready to use.

I picked up the knife and smiled. "We'll leave it at your way for now. When it gets past seven we can argue about it."

At six thirty the dusk began pushing into the room. Keegan went to the light switch and tried it. Nothing happened.

It was quarter to seven when the floodlights in the yard were turned on. Inside the kitchen pillars of light leaned against the windows.

Seven o'clock came and passed.

At ten after, I finished the last of the vanilla extract and threw the glass at the sink. "Now let's do it my way," I said. "Let them listen to Stevens die and they'll find us a car real fast."

Cellophane crackled as Keegan unwrapped another cigar. "Stop smacking your lips over Stevens and start thinking."

I sat on the edge of the table and began flipping the knife at the piece of light that lay over one corner of it and waited.

"Let's look at this thing with brains," Keegan said. "The party's over. We've had it."

I kept playing with the knife, and neither Turk nor I said anything.

Keegan went on. "Like Brock said, if we get away with it here, the same thing will be tried in every pen in the country. That's why Cramer's not going to let it happen."

"He'll have to," I said. "If we do it my way. We give them one body. That makes them know we got nothing more to lose. We can burn only once, and it'll be no cost to us to give them another corpse if they don't do like we say."

Keegan reached for his glass and then saw that it was empty. He pushed it away. "Use that beautiful imagination of yours now, Gomez. Suppose even that doesn't work. Start thinking about the hot seat."

Brock spoke from the darkness. "I watched a dozen of them take the walk. Ask me how scared they were."

I looked toward Brock and Stevens. They were in the shadows, but I knew they were watching and hoping.

Turk broke the silence. "It's not going to be a happy time for us when Brock and Stevens put on their uniforms again."

"I'm not looking forward to it either," Keegan said "But it's better than frying."

There was another long quiet, and then Turk sighed. "That part about being alive persuades me."

Keegan's face came into the light as he leaned forward. "Make it unanimous, Gomez."

Brock spoke again. "It's something to see when they turn on the juice. They jump against the straps like the devil was burning inside of them. They're supposed to be dead in a second, but it don't look like that to me, Gomez. Not when they fight it like that."

I stuck the knife into the table. "I'm finished," I said. "Just like you are."

Keegan relaxed back into his chair. "First I finish this cigar. It'll be a long time before I taste another one."

And then I saw it.

I whirled toward the window, and it was there on the sill, a small silhouette against the light.

I whipped off my cap and smashed at it again and again until it was a broken stain on the stone.

"Jesus!" Turk said sharply. "You scared the hell out of me, jumping up like that. It wasn't nothing but a little cockroach."

Another floodlight flashed on outside, and a slant of light cut across the room and fell on Stevens.

Iciness gripped at my insides. Stevens knew about them now, and I knew what he was thinking about. He knew what I was afraid of. When we were back in our cells he'd know what to do to me.

I jerked the knife out of the table and went after him.

Keegan shouted and moved forward, but he was too late to stop me.

Keegan pulled at me, but I didn't let go of Stevens until I was through.

Keegan looked down at the body, and then his eyes met mine.

"All right, Gomez," he said quietly. "Now we got no choice. We try it your way."

ROBERT TURNER

ROBERT TURNER has contributed six hundred stories to magazines in the past fifteen years or so, and nearly every one of them has been a gem in its field. Many of his best stories have appeared in *Manhunt,* and this one is perhaps the best of those. It deals with the kind of thing that could happen to any of us today, a siege of terror that begins with an unimportant little argument in a drive-in movie.

Movie Night

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR to ours is empty now. The Baylors have gone to another city where Mrs. Baylor's folks live and can help them out. The people who bought the Baylor house won't be moving in for another week. We'll be glad when they do. It may help a little to have someone in that empty house next door. Not much, though. Nothing will help much, not even the loaded gun I keep in the house all the time now. The only thing that would have helped the night the whole thing started, we wouldn't let Fred Baylor do.

Fred wasn't really a bad guy. Sure, he could be a little boorish with that low boiling point of his and he sometimes had some slipshod views about life, but then, who hasn't? But he was a good man on his job and he surely was a good family man who never boozed it up or stepped out on his wife, and his kids were well behaved. He was a pretty good neighbor

Anyhow, Thursday nights at the drive-in movie near our neighborhood were family nights, which meant that a carful of people were admitted for a dollar. The Baylors and my wife and I had gotten into the habit of going every Thursday night. It was something to do, you know, a way to get out of the house for a change.

Our older daughter, Marie, took care of her little sister as well as the two Baylor kids, over at our house. We each gave Marie a dollar for baby-sitting, and the thing was fine with everybody.

The night of the trouble, the picture at the drive-in dealt with juvenile delinquency. It was a vicious story that pulled no punches. Before it was half over, Baylor, who takes his movies as excitably as a ten-year-old boy, anyway, was boiling over. He seemed to take every hoodlum act portrayed on the screen as a personal affront.

At first the two women and myself laughed and tried to kid him out of it. This only enraged him more. Finally, disgusted, I said:

"Fred, relax, take it easy! It's only a movie. It's not real. You're spoiling the thing for the rest of us. Calm down before you blow a fuse."

"You don't understand, Gene," he said. "It's not just this movie; it's the whole lousy deal with these kids. It's just that this picture is the payoff for me; it sums everything up. For years all I hear is juvenile delinquency, juvenile delinquency, and what should and shouldn't be done about it. Preaching, preaching. And all of it bull. There's only one thing should be done."

"All right, brain-boy," his wife, Dot, butted in. "You know the answer to a big problem that's got everybody else stumped, okay, okay!"

"You're damn right!" Baylor pounded his knee. "People have got to start standing up to these punks for a change. What are they, for God's sake? They're not real criminals. They're not even grown men; just a bunch of little rats, wet behind the ears yet and too full of animal spirits, and yet they've got all grownups scared stiff of them."

"They may be kids," I told him. "But a lot of them are grown up physically. I've seen some *I* wouldn't want to tangle with."

"You see?" he said. "There you are. People are afraid of them now, by sheer reputation alone. A few of them get really vicious, and thousands of them ride along on that rep, getting

away with anything they try. What these punks need is a few grown men to stand up to them, teach them a little respect, slap them down, knock the stuffings out of them the first time they start anything, the very first time. Then they'll learn their lesson before they get too far out of hand. That kind of discipline they understand."

"Okay, okay," Dot Baylor said. "Very shrewd, very scientific. Now, how about hushing your large mouth for a while and letting the rest of us enjoy the picture? Please, huh, Fred, huh?"

Baylor quieted a little but kept erupting and grumbling through the rest of the picture. When it was over he said:

"Man, oh, man, what an ending! That ties it up. The punks turn over a new leaf, are sorry for what they've done, all because some social worker saves one of their lives and everybody lives happily ever after. . . . Can you imagine the way the *real* jaydees are laughing at that one? That's just the kind of thing makes 'em so damn cocky—nobody *does* anything to 'em. Nobody gives 'em a dose of their own medicine, like maybe breaking a few of their heads or something."

"*Arf, arf, arf!*" Dot said now, a little embarrassed. "Listen to Tiger Boy Baylor. Only his bark is worse than his bite. . . . Now, let's drop the subject and all head for the snack bar for hotdogs and Cokes. Okay?"

I breathed a sigh of relief, hoping Baylor's harangue was over for the evening, and hastily opened the door to get out and follow Dot's suggestion.

It was intermission time, with nothing on the screen but local advertisements, and crowds from the cars were all heading toward the rest rooms and the big snack bar, at the rear of the movie lot. As we walked along, Baylor said:

"You think I'm wrong about these young punks, watch the way they'll be acting at the snack bar. They'll be swaggering all over the place, trying to look tough, ready to start trouble because they know damn well nobody'll have guts enough to try to stop them."

Baylor and his wife were walking in front of us as he said that, and I saw Dot grab his arm and hug it to her. I heard

her whisper, "Hold it, Buster. We don't want any demonstrations of your methods, understand? Please, Fred, for my sake, don't start any trouble."

"Sure," he said, somewhat less surly. "*I* won't start anything. I promise you that."

The snack bar was already pretty crowded when we got there, and I saw that Baylor had been partly right; there was an unusually large showing of boys between the ages of fifteen and twenty, probably because of the type of film playing, and some of them were plenty tough-looking. And they *were* swaggering around and trying to look sinister.

A feeling of foreboding suddenly took hold of me then. I had an almost uncontrollable urge to wheel around and get out of there fast, to take Anne back to the car and forget about refreshments until we got home. But then Anne said, "Mmmmmm, I'm dying for one of those good franks they make here. Maybe I'll even have two. Can I, honey?"

She looked up at me and her eyes were dancing and she was smiling and she looked twenty years old, at the most, that moment. I couldn't spoil her fun for some silly hunch. I told her:

"Doll, you can have all the hotdogs in the place and a whole barrel of root beer to wash 'em down. Y'know why? Because you're de most beautiful chick in de dive, see?" I leered at her.

She laughed and lightly dug her elbow into my ribs. Then we were right in the middle of the big jam around the hot-dog and soft-drink counters, fighting our way in and further conversation was impossible.

A few minutes later we all had our dogs and drinks and moved back away from the counters, but it was still pretty crowded there in the enclosure, where everybody was standing around eating, loath to go back to their cars until just before the second feature was set to start.

Right behind Fred and Dot Baylor were four or five real young thug types, horsing around. They were overly loud and their language wasn't any too gentle, and people were staring at them disapprovingly but it didn't seem to bother

them. If anything, they seemed to enjoy the attention; their voices grew louder, their horseplay—trying to spill each other's drinks, shoving each other, stuff like that—grew rougher.

All this time Dot Baylor and my wife, Anne, were jabbering about something, but I wasn't paying them any attention. I kept an eye on the bunch behind Baylor and his wife. Soon I found myself nervously gulping my hot dog and forcing down the last of my drink too fast and encouraging the others to do the same.

"Come on," I said. "Let's finish up and get out of this crazy mob and back to the car."

Baylor saw me glance at the bunch behind him. "What for?" he demanded. "Take it easy; enjoy yourself. Don't let those guys make you nervous. We got as much right here as they have. What's the big hurry?"

It was almost as though it had been timed, the way he got his answer.

Behind Baylor, one youth playfully pushed another a little too hard. He lost his balance and stumbled awkwardly against Baylor. Baylor's arm was jogged, and some of his drink slopped onto his shirt. Hot color flooded his face as the boy who had bumped him, a kid about seventeen, stocky and bull-shouldered, with bushy black hair and side burns, merely glanced around casually and said. "Whoops!" and then laughingly rejoined the rest of his bunch.

His voice achingly tight, Baylor said, "How do you like that? The dirty little punk doesn't even have sense enough to apologize."

He turned suddenly and approached the group behind him. He grabbed the kid who'd bumped him by the shoulder and spun him about.

"Hey, you," he said. "Didn't anybody ever teach you any manners? Where were you brought up, in a gutter or something?"

The laughter slipped from the gang's faces. The one Baylor was speaking to knit his thick black brows. He shrugged

Baylor's hand from his shoulder. He said, "What's the matter with *you*?"

"You know," Baylor told him. "You knock me off my feet and slop soda all over my shirt without even bothering to apologize, and then ask what's the matter. Maybe I ought to *teach* you a few manners."

The bushy-haired kid gave a self-conscious laugh and turned to the others. "Hey, listen to this cat," he said. "Dig this here hardcase, huh? He's got a couple spots on his shirt, he wants to make a Supreme Court case."

"All right, wise guy," Baylor said. "How do *you* like it?"

He tossed the rest of his soft drink full into the kid's face. The kid gasped and smeared his eyes with the back of a hand. "Why, you dirty creep!" he said. He threw a haymaker at Baylor's jaw, but he was slow and clumsy. Baylor blocked the punch with the palm of his left hand. He brought his right up in a short arc, and it caught the bushy-haired kid on the point of the jaw. His legs buckled, and he dropped.

Then one of the others rushed Baylor. He resembled the bushy-haired kid, except that he was smaller and thinner. He said, "You can't do that to my brother. I'm going to cut you. I'll cut your damn heart out for that."

He had a switchblade, sprung open, in his hand. He held it with the cutting edge up, thumb bracing it, like an experienced knife fighter.

I moved in fast, not even thinking about it, not doing the hero bit, just acting on instinct. I punted the knife from the kid's hand.

When he grabbed his wrist and turned to me in surprise, Fred Baylor went for *him* then. He grabbed a handful of the kid's shirt front. "Pull a knife on me, will you?" he said. With his free hand he whip-slapped the kid back and forth, back and forth. The kid's nose and lips were bleeding by the time a special officer employed by the theater pushed through the crowd and helped me pull Baylor away.

It was over then. When the officer demanded to know what had happened, the kids were sullen, uncommunicative, but Baylor came right out with the whole story. Then the offi-

cer, a beefy, quiet, but capable-looking man, bent and picked up the dropped knife. He studied it for a moment and then looked up at Baylor.

"We've had trouble with this bunch before, mister. But it looks like we got 'em cold, this time, with this kind of evidence. It'll be assault and possession. We might even get an assault with intent to kill on one of them. You'll have to prefer charges, of course."

Baylor was calmed down a little, but his face was still somewhat flushed and his temper still wasn't in full control. "That suits me fine," he said, glaring at the kids. "Maybe some time in the poky'll teach these young punks some respect for decent citizens. The sooner they're stopped cold, the better, for my money. What do I have to do to prefer charges?"

The bushy-haired kid who had started the trouble, still rubbing his swollen jaw, said, "That's right, mac, go right on bein' a wise guy. Give us some more trouble now. Go right ahead. You push any charges against me and my brother, you'll never forget it. We got plenty friends who won't let you."

Baylor looked at Bushy Hair, ducked his head toward him in a disparaging gesture, and then turned to the officer. "Listen to this young squirt. Now he's trying to scare me off. He *still* thinks he can tough-talk his way out of trouble. Let's go, officer, and do whatever has to be done to lock these punks up."

Then Dot, Baylor's wife, stepped toward him. She grabbed at his arm. She was very pale, and her eyes were big and frightened. "No, Fred!" she gasped. "Wait a minute. What's the sense in getting further involved? Haven't you done enough? What do you want to do now, get our names in the newspaper, lose a lot of time from your job going to court to testify? It isn't worth it, Fred. It isn't *our* job to try and fight a thing like this. Come on now, let's get out of here."

Baylor looked down at her in surprise and indecision. "But, honey," he said. "We can't just let these guys get away with a ruckus like this in a public place, pulling a knife, trying to

kill me, stuff like that. You let 'em get away with it once and—"

"I don't care," she broke in. "That's none of our business. We've had all the trouble we need already. You want to get a reputation in town as a common brawler, a man who goes around hitting kids, and—"

"Hey, wait a minute," he stopped her. "This *kid* is almost as big as me and he was *armed*, honey!"

"Please, Fred!" She kept plucking at his arm, her face working desperately. "I tell you it's not *up* to us. At least think of *me* a little. *I* don't want to become involved, have to leave the kids to spend days in court, testifying and all. Please, Fred, use some sense, some good judgment."

I could see he was beginning to weaken. I could see Dot's point, too. Frankly, I began to think of what a nuisance it might be for all of us. I could be called as a witness, too. I said:

"Fred, maybe Dot's got something there. I think we've done all that's necessary. These kids have had a scare; that's probably enough punishment. They won't bother anybody else. Maybe you'd better skip it, Fred."

The cop stepped in then. "I can't *make* you prefer charges, mister, but I *can* tell you what I think. If you let these young thugs off, it'll be a big mistake. If they're not *really* stopped now that the law has a chance to step in, God knows what they'll be up to next. It's up to you, mister."

"That's fine for you to say," Dot Baylor told him. "It's only part of your job, things like this. But my husband's got other things to think about—his family, his own job. We don't want to get involved any further and that's it."

For a long moment Baylor looked at his wife, and then he turned to the cop, said with a wry grin, "I guess she's the boss, officer." He shrugged. "Maybe she's right, so to hell with it. Sorry."

There was a little more talk but the issue seemed to be settled, and in another few minutes the cop ordered the gang of kids off the lot and we returned to the car. The Baylors walked ahead of us, and we couldn't hear all of what they

were saying but they were arguing, and it seemed to be because Fred Baylor still wasn't sure he'd done the right thing.

Back at the car we decided that since the second picture didn't look like much, anyhow, and none of us was now in the mood to sit there and stare at the screen, there was no sense in staying.

None of us spoke much the rest of the way home. At the house they picked up their kids and paid Marie for baby-sitting. There were some slightly cool or at least unenthusiastic good nights and they went home.

Anne and I sat up for a while reading and talking. It was well after midnight before we went to bed. How long we'd been asleep I didn't know at the time, when we were awakened by the most shrilly piercing, frightening scream I'd ever heard.

We both jumped out of bed, and I put on the light and ran to the window. I looked out and saw that the outside front-door light of the Baylors' house was on. A few feet down the front walk, Dot Baylor, in her nightgown, was standing in the wash of light from the door, and her mouth was gaped for that God-awful screaming. Then it stopped, and Dot Baylor collapsed on the walk.

We ran downstairs, and I made Anne stay in the house until I saw what this was all about. Outside, I soon found out. On their lawn, behind shrubbery that had obscured the sight from our bedroom window, was the body of a man, clad in pajamas, sprawled on his back. It was Fred Baylor, although I didn't recognize him right off.

I went and squatted down beside him. His face was a mask of blood; some of it still spurting from what seemed to be thousands of pinholes and tiny cuts all over his face.

When he weakly mumbled something, I realized that he wasn't dead or even unconscious. I tried to help him to his feet, but he protested, screaming, "No, no! My legs, oh, my God-damn legs!"

Through big rents at the knees of his pajamas, I saw that his kneecaps were swollen twice their normal size.

It was much, much later, after we'd taken Fred Baylor and

his wife, Dot, who was suffering from shock, to the hospital, that we learned what had happened.

The Baylors were awakened by the sound of someone knocking on their front door. Fred went down to investigate. There was nobody there, but in the moonlight he saw, halfway down the walk, a figure sprawled face down on the sidewalk, moaning. Naturally, he went to investigate.

As he bent over the figure, something hit him in the face. When he straightened, the figure on the ground sprang up and started swinging some object at him. Then he was hit a number of times across the knees with what the police surmised to be pick-ax handles. At the same time he was being hit in the face repeatedly with what police said, again surmising, must have been socks filled with broken glass.

Well, we all knew who had done it, of course. But a police lieutenant said, "You're probably right, but we'll have a hell of a time doing anything about it unless some neighbor saw them, or at least their car. We'll somehow learn who those kids at the drive-in were and pick 'em up for questioning, of course. But they'll all stick together; they'll all have alibis and we won't be able to get anything on 'em."

That was the way it was, too. No neighbor had seen them (or at least none would admit to it). No real arrest was made.

Fred Baylor wasn't too horribly scarred; it would only look as though he were badly pock-marked. By some miracle, neither of his eyes was damaged. But both kneecaps were badly smashed. He's had three operations on them already but he'll never walk right again, they say. And Fred had been a steel worker.

When I went to see Fred Baylor in the hospital, he was not only a physically beaten man; he was whipped, period. All the old familiar fight and fire was gone out of him. Except for one moment, when he looked up at me, with something pretty close to disgust in his eyes.

"You and Dot," he said. "The peace-lovers, who didn't want any more trouble, who didn't want to get involved!" He pointed down to his leg. "How about this kind of involvement? This was the easy way, hah? The right way?"

I felt color flushing up from my neck, but I didn't say anything. I couldn't meet Baylor's eyes, either. I wondered briefly how his wife, Dot, must feel now, about shooting her mouth off and interfering, that night. And then I mumbled some kind of good-by and left.

I didn't let what Baylor said or what had happened to him, get me down, though. Not right away. Not until a couple of nights later when a rock the size of a grapefruit crashed through our living-room window, just skimming the head of our daughter, sitting watching TV. Attached to the rock was a note made up from words cut out of a newspaper. It said, *When the cops stop watching this neighborhood so close you're next wise guy.*

THERE IS NO MORE TIRED CLICHÉ than the one to the effect that the man who follows needs no introduction. And the added danger is that a man who rates that statement usually has so many quotable achievements that he ends up getting a longer introduction than most. Both pitfalls, therefore, will be avoided here with the simple comment that Erskine Caldwell is one of the world's great writers, that he has written such famous stories of the Deep South as *God's Little Acre* and *Tobacco Road,* and that here is one of his great, penetrating Southern studies in miniature.

In Memory of Judith Courtright

IT WAS A LONG TIME before anyone in Lancaster was able to discover the reason why Merle Randolph killed himself with his father's shotgun that Monday morning in early spring just as the bell was ringing for classes to begin at the consolidated school.

For one thing, it was an almost unheard-of tragedy for any boy of eighteen to commit suicide, and besides, nobody in Lancaster could think of the slightest motive that would induce a boy like Merle Randolph to take his own life.

Merle's mother, Sarah Randolph, heard the blast of the shotgun a few minutes after Merle finished eating breakfast and left for school, but she paid little or no attention to it at the time, because several of the neighbors had recently become interested in marksmanship and were frequently firing shotguns, rifles, and pistols at tin cans and other targets.

However, as it happened, when Merle's father, George Randolph, as he had been in the habit of doing for many years,

came home from the hardware store at noon to eat lunch, Sarah remembered having heard the sound of the shot and she told George that the more she thought about it the stranger it seemed that anybody would be target-practicing so early in the morning. When George finished eating, he left the house and walked across the back yard to the rear of the garage. That was when it was first known that Merle Randolph had killed himself.

It was Merle's senior year in high school, and besides having satisfactory grades in all of his studies, he had been the leading scorer and star player on the basketball team for the past two years. The basketball season had closed on Saturday night of the previous week, when Lancaster High played a winning game—the score was 72 to 64—against one of the high-school teams in New Orleans.

Naturally, everybody in Lancaster had been highly elated by the result, and even the New Orleans newspapers had praised the Lancaster team for being successful against a high school that had an enrollment ten times larger than Lancaster's. Lancaster was a small town of about four thousand population in an agricultural and lumbering community and was situated in the piney-woods region of the coastal plain about sixty-five miles northeast of New Orleans. The consolidated school in Lancaster had an enrollment of approximately three hundred boys and girls in the primary and grammar-school grades and about a hundred and fifty students in the high school.

When the Lancaster school opened during the first week of the previous September, there were two new teachers on the faculty. One of the new teachers was Eve Grayson, who taught the first grade, and the other one was Judith Courtright, who was in charge of the kindergarten.

Eve and Judith had graduated from the state teachers' college, where they had been roommates for two years, and it had long been their ambition to begin their teaching careers in the same school. They had been very pleased and happy when they were notified shortly after graduation that their

applications had been approved and accepted by the Lancaster school board and that arrangements would be made for them to share a small apartment in a private home during the school year. The letter each of them received was signed by George Randolph, who was president of the school board.

Unlike Judith, who was a reserved, soft-spoken, dark-haired girl, Eve Grayson was vivacious, carefree, impulsive, and brightly blonde-haired. She was twenty-one at that time, a year younger than Judith, and she had been very popular with numerous young men, as well as with several of the unmarried instructors, throughout her four years in college. It was not unusual, then, for Eve to be upset and exceedingly unhappy when she came to Lancaster and was confronted by the fact that it was a policy of the school board to make a pointed request of all unmarried teachers that they have dates only on week-ends and not during the school week.

Eve rebelled at once by going out in public on a Tuesday night with a young bank clerk, and two days later she received a firmly worded reminder from the school board that her services would not be required in the future if she did not respect the board's request. The final paragraph of the letter explained that the board felt that teachers would not set a good example to the students if they engaged in frivolous activities during the evening hours of the school week. That was how it happened that Eve Grayson resigned from her teaching position at the end of the first week of the term. She left immediately on a bus for New Orleans.

Judith was unhappy about what had happened because she and Eve had been such close friends for the past two years, but she knew it was useless to argue with anyone as headstrong and impetuous as Eve Grayson. Eve had tried to persuade Judith to resign and go to New Orleans with her, but Judith looked forward to a career of teaching and she wanted to be successful from the beginning, especially since she was not engaged to be married and fully expected to teach school for many years.

However, she wanted to keep Eve Grayson's friendship, and she promised to visit Eve in New Orleans on many week-

ends during the remainder of the school year. When Judith questioned her about the kind of job she could get in New Orleans in order to support herself, Eve laughed and told her not to worry about that. She reminded Judith that she had been to New Orleans several times during summer vacations and that she knew her way around.

During the fall term of school, Judith met several young men of the town, and she had an occasional date on week-ends with some of them. However, none of the men she met in Lancaster impressed her seriously, and she had no thoughts of marriage. She spent the Christmas holidays with her parents in the northern part of the state, where her father owned a drug store, even though in letter after letter Eve Grayson had urged and begged her to come to New Orleans for the holidays, promising that she would meet many interesting men while she was there.

Each time Judith answered one of Eve's letters, she always promised that she would come to New Orleans soon for a week-end visit. Eve wrote to her in detail about the comfortable apartment she had rented, describing the furnishings of the two bedrooms and the large parlor, and always ended her letters by begging Judith to share it with her. She still had not told Judith what kind of job she had or about the work she was doing, even though Judith continued to ask her about it nearly every time she wrote.

When Judith came back to Lancaster at the end of the Christmas holidays, she was met at the train by Merle Randolph.

With a shy, boyish grin, and trying manfully to hide the blush on his cheeks, Merle came up to her at the railroad station and said that he had his father's automobile and that he had come to take her to the house where she had her small apartment. As she got into the sedan, she was thinking that Merle's father had sent him—and probably after much protest on Merle's part—to meet her and help her with her baggage, and that it was merely a courtesy to her from the president of the school board.

While they were driving through town, Judith tried several

times to get Merle to talk to her, but he was noticeably shy and embarrassed in her presence, and he answered all of her questions by nervously nodding or shaking his head.

Finally, though, when they reached the house where she lived, and with an abrupt and unexpected boldness, Merle stopped the car and gripped her hands before she could open the door and get out. Catching her breath, Judith looked at him in surprise.

"Miss Courtright—" Merle said excitedly, his voice quavering. "Miss Courtright—"

His whole face was flushed by that time, and she could feel the violent trembling of his hands.

"What is it, Merle?" Judith asked as calmly as she could. She had seen him glance shyly at her a number of times at school, and somehow she had been aware that frequently he was watching her from a distance while she was on the playground with her kindergarten class. There was the time, too, when she was walking home late one afternoon and suddenly had the feeling that Merle Randolph was following her, but when she looked back over her shoulder, there was no one within sight. "Tell me what it is, Merle," she said after that, looking directly at him.

"Miss Courtright—I want to ask you something—" he said hesitantly.

"What is it you want to ask me, Merle?"

"Miss Courtright—I want to see you—" he said, quickly averting his eyes. "Will you let me—Miss Courtright—will you?"

"Of course, Merle," she said, smiling a little. "You're seeing me right now."

"I don't mean like this—I mean the other way—"

"What other way, Merle?"

"Well—a different way—"

He was gazing at her pleadingly, as though begging for understanding. She wanted to tell him that she did understand, and she wondered what she could say or what gesture she could make that would put him at ease, but at the same

time she hesitated to let herself encourage him. She could feel a slight trembling of her body.

"Will you—Miss Courtright?" she heard him say.

"What other way do you mean, Merle?" she asked then.

"I want to see you—tonight—"

"Why do you want to do that?" she asked, turning and looking away from him. She was certain she realized what he meant, but just the same some impulse drove her to want to hear him say it. "Tell me why, Merle."

"Because it's—because I like you—Miss Courtright—and I want—"

"No, Merle," she spoke up quickly, looking into his face and shaking her head firmly. She realized the time had come when she must discourage him. "You can't do that."

"Why not?" he asked dejectedly. "Don't you like me?"

"It's not that, Merle. Of course, I like you. You are a very fine boy. I admire you very much. But—but I'm a teacher, and it just wouldn't do for a teacher to see one of the students —not the way you're talking about. Now you understand, don't you?"

"Nobody would know about it—Miss Courtright," he persisted, squeezing her hands more tightly. "I could come here to see you after dark tonight—and nobody would ever know about it."

He moved closer as he spoke, and she could feel the tenseness of his muscular body as he pressed against her. Judith closed her eyes momentarily, telling herself that she must not let him kiss her, because she was afraid if that happened she would no longer have control over herself.

"You're so beautiful—Miss Courtright," he was saying in a husky voice. "Everything about you is beautiful—you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen. I've watched you every day since you came here to teach—and you're prettier all the time." He squeezed her hands in his powerful grip. "Let me come to see you tonight! Please let me! Please, Miss Courtright!"

Taking a deep breath, Judith smiled at him tenderly as she slowly shook her head.

"No, Merle," she spoke to him in a low voice, trying to be

as kind as she could. "You must remember that I'm twenty-two years old, and you're only eighteen. Even if I weren't a teacher and you weren't one of the students, there would still be that difference. You understand now, don't you?"

"That doesn't make any difference," he protested. "That doesn't matter at all. I don't care about that."

"But I do, Merle," she told him steadfastly, trying to withdraw her hands from his. "It makes a great deal of difference to me."

"I don't see why," he said, sad with disappointment.

She smiled at him kindly. "Some day you'll understand, Merle."

With a sudden movement, he put his arms around her and pulled her tightly against him, and she realized that he would surely kiss her if she did not get away from him at once. Pushing against him with all her might, she managed to open the door of the car and get out before he could stop her.

Presently, subdued and silent, and not looking at her, Merle took her two suitcases from the car and carried them to the front door of the house. Putting down the suitcases, and with only a hasty glance at her, Merle turned and hurried back to the car. While her eyes slowly filled with tears, she stood at the door until the sedan had passed out of sight up the street.

Judith took the bus to New Orleans as soon as school was dismissed on Friday afternoon.

Several days before that she had written to Eve Grayson and said that at last she was coming to spend the week-end, and Eve had promptly sent her a joyous telegram. She arrived in New Orleans at dusk and took a taxi to Eve's apartment.

It had been four months since they had last seen each other, and for two hours they talked and laughed about everything they could think of, the only exception being that in the beginning Judith was careful not to mention Merle Randolph. Several times while they were talking, Eve would try to make Judith promise to come to visit her every week-end during the remainder of the school year. Judith would say that she would try to come as often as she could from that

week onward. Each time that happened, Eve would pour some more whisky into their glasses and they would drink a toast to the week-ends to come.

After they had had several drinks, Judith finally told Eve about Merle Randolph and how he continued to try to persuade her to let him come to see her by writing pleading notes and putting them on her desk at school or under her apartment door.

"The boy is infatuated with you, Judith," Eve said knowingly. "Why don't you let him come to see you just once, anyway?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she protested. "It's too much of a risk. Somebody would find out about it, and then I'd have to resign and leave Lancaster. Besides, I don't know what might happen if we were alone together like that."

Eve laughed. "It's my guess that it would be the most spectacular kissing-date in the history of Lancaster."

"That's what I'd be afraid of," Judith said frankly.

Later in the evening, after they had eaten dinner, the phone rang several times. Each time Eve answered the call, she would say that she was engaged for the evening and then ask the caller to phone again the next night. During the evening, and until they finally went to bed at midnight, Judith attempted several times to get Eve to tell her what kind of job she had and about the kind of work she did, but Eve always laughed and said it was too unimportant to talk about at a time like that when they had not seen each other for so long a time and had so many interesting things to talk about.

Late the next afternoon, which was Saturday and the day before Judith was going to return to Lancaster, the phone rang. After Eve had talked to someone for a while, she told Judith that one of her friends would be there in a few minutes. Then just before the doorbell rang, Eve asked her if she would mind waiting in the other bedroom for a little while.

Judith had just gone into her room and closed the door when she heard a man's voice in the parlor, and in a few minutes she heard the closing of Eve's bedroom door. During the next half hour she could hear voices and sounds in the

room next to hers, although she was unable to understand anything that was said, and then later there was a knock on her door. When she opened it, Eve came into the room and sat down on the bed.

"Where is your friend?" she asked Eve.

"Oh, he's gone."

"So soon?"

Eve answered with a nod of her head.

"Does he always leave so quickly?" Judith asked.

Eve smiled at her. "What you mean, Judith, is do they always leave so soon—not just he."

"I don't understand," Judith told her.

Eve got up from the bed. "Let's go make ourselves a drink, Judith," she said as she walked from the room.

They went into the kitchenette and filled two glasses with ice cubes and whisky. Nothing was said until they went into the parlor and sat down on the sofa.

"I hope you're coming back next week-end," Eve said presently. "Please do, Judith."

"I don't think I can come that soon," Judith said. "But I will come back again—if you want me to."

"Then promise to come back two weeks from now," Eve begged. "I want to introduce you to some friends of mine. I'm sure you'll like them."

"All right," Judith agreed. "It's a promise."

The phone rang and Eve got up to answer it.

It was Saturday again, and another warm night in early spring. Judith had come to spend the week-end with Eve once more. Every week during the past two months she had left Lancaster on the bus as soon as school was dismissed on Friday afternoon, returning there from New Orleans late Sunday night.

The phone had rung several times already that evening, and as they were in the habit of doing now, she and Eve took turns answering the calls. Shortly after eleven o'clock the phone rang once more, and it was Judith's turn to answer it.

Somebody who would not give his name asked if he could come to the apartment right away.

Eve was in her room when the doorbell rang, and Judith opened the door. Startled, she stepped backward, putting her hand over her mouth. Even in the dimly lighted room, Judith had recognized him at once. Merle Randolph's tall, muscular figure and stubby light hair and shy expression were more conspicuously his than ever before. He still had not looked directly at her. He had gone to the middle of the parlor and was standing there glancing at the strange surroundings.

Judith slowly closed the door and stood with her back against it as thoughts raced in confusion through her mind. The next thing she was aware of, Merle had turned around and was staring open-mouthed at her.

"Miss Courtright—" he said almost indistinctly. "Miss Courtright—what are you doing here—"

Judith could find no way to answer him. She continued to stand there with her back pressed tightly against the door, gripping her hands and holding her breath for moment after moment. The room seemed to have suddenly been filled with sultry, stifling heat.

"But—Miss Courtright—you're not—" Merle said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"What are you doing here, Merle?" she asked weakly.

"We played a basketball game in New Orleans tonight—and we won it, too—the score was 72 to 64. It was the last game of the season for us, and the coach said we could walk around town for a while or go to a movie and not have to get back to the hotel till midnight. While I was walking around, somebody told me to call a certain phone number—if I wanted to—but I didn't know you—"

Judith managed to smile slightly. "I'm glad Lancaster won the game," she said.

There was a brief interval of silence in the room after that.

"What are you going to do—Merle?" Judith asked finally.

Merle shook his head. "I don't know—Miss Courtright—but I can't stay here! I've got to go!"

"But, Merle—"

As he came across the room in long strides, Judith moved away from the door. When he reached it, he flung open the door, and without looking at her again, ran toward the street. After he had gone Judith closed the door and locked it securely.

By the time she reached the sofa and fell upon it, her eyes were filled with tears. Sometime later she was aware that Eve was shaking her and begging her to tell what had happened, but Judith closed her eyes more tightly and cried out with all the despair of her heart.

JONATHAN LORD

THE ACCIDENT WAS a bad one, and it involved a kid. It wasn't surprising that the two men on their way to the waterfront were shocked when they saw it.

Day's Work

THEY WERE WALKING toward the waterfront area, walking quietly, when they heard the car hit the kid. They stopped short at the sound of the kid's scream, and then they began to run toward the accident.

They were quietly dressed, conservative-looking men, lean and hard-muscled and in perfect condition, and they didn't puff or get out of breath. As they ran, the taller man said, "It sounded like a bad one." He had blond hair, blue eyes, and thin, sensitive features, and there was a look of shock on his face as he stared ahead through the darkness.

The other man was very short, just a shade over five feet, and his hair and eyes were dark. "Yeah," he said. "That car was going plenty fast." He added softly, "Hell of a thing, street accidents."

They turned a corner, and the accident was right there before them. The kid was about ten or eleven, lying stiff and unmoving, his body thrown a full foot ahead of the front wheels of the car. The driver stood alongside the car, his face chalk-white and his lips twitching, staring at the kid and at the gathering crowd, and then back at the kid. "I didn't even see him," he said. "He come running out from between two parked cars. . . ."

The blond man stepped forward, looking at the crowd. "Anybody send for an ambulance?" he asked.

A woman in the crowd answered him. "Man went to call one," she said. "Ain't no use, though—the kid's gone. I saw the whole thing. I—"

"You never can tell," the blond man said. "Doctors can do wonderful things sometimes. You never can tell." He stared down at the kid. "I wonder if we ought to move him, cover him or something."

"Better not," the short man said. "If he *is* still alive, you can harm him by moving him." He looked down at the kid, and then turned his face away. "Hell of a thing, huh, Joe? A little kid like that . . ."

The blond man's eyes caught the driver's, and the driver took a blind step forward, toward him. "I didn't even see him," the driver said. "He come out suddenly—" He stopped short as the blond man turned away.

Then a police car arrived, with the ambulance right behind it, and the two men stepped away into the crowd. They stood watching sadly as an interne examined the boy briefly and placed a sheet over his body.

"We better go," the short man said. "We don't want to be late."

The blond man glanced at his watch, a thin-gold, expensive timepiece. "We won't be late," he said. "We've got an hour. Mr. Conners said he won't be there until eleven."

They stood watching a few minutes longer. Then they walked away, headed again for the waterfront area, walking silently for almost two blocks. Finally the short man said, "Things like that break your heart."

The blond man nodded. "Kid was just about the same age as my oldest," he said.

"Mine, too," the short man said. "Scares the hell out of a father, seeing something like that."

The blond man nodded again. "Worst thing is," he said, "there isn't a damn thing you can do about it. You can't expect a ten-year-old kid to hang around the house all day, and you can't expect the kid to hang around his mother all day, either. You've just got to pound it into his head about being careful when he crosses the streets—and then you keep your fingers crossed."

"That's the rub, all right," the short man said. "I ever

catch one of my kids crossing in the middle of the street, I'll pound his can so he won't sit down for a month."

They were deep in the waterfront area now, and the streets were shabby and rundown and completely deserted. They continued walking, talking softly, until they reached the water's edge.

"This is the spot, right here," the blond man said. "The boat's supposed to come in over there, near that painted line."

"We better get in the shadows," the short man said.

There was darkness just a few feet to the left of them, off where the street light did not penetrate, and they walked over until the shadows enclosed them, waiting for the third man to show up. He came after they'd waited fifteen minutes.

He was extremely tall, much taller than the other two, and dressed in the same quiet, conservative way, but his clothes were a bit shabbier than theirs, and he was very nervous. He stopped at the water's edge, looked at his watch, and then stood staring out at the water.

The men in shadows stood watching him for a moment, and then the blond man stepped forward. "Better forget the boat, Marty," he said.

The man at the water's edge turned and stared at him, sick fear on his face.

"Better forget the boat," the blond man said. "You won't be on it tonight."

The tall man's lips were trembling now, and he pressed them together to steady them. He said, finally, "Give me a break, Joe. . . ."

"No breaks," the blond man said.

"For God's sake, Joe," the tall man said, "act like a human being—let me get on that boat. Who the hell will ever know? I'll spend the rest of my life out of the country. Jesus, Joe, we grew up together—we been friends twenty years."

The blond man shook his head. "You shouldn't have done it," he said. "We stopped being friends when Mr. Conners gave us the order on you this afternoon. No breaks, Marty."

The tall man stared at him for a moment, and then, hopelessly, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe you better turn around, Marty," the blond man said softly.

The tall man turned his back and then, abruptly, began to run. He had taken four steps when a bullet cut him down, onto his knees. There were three more shots, and he cried out once softly and fell forward on his face.

The two men walked up to the body, and the blond man turned the dead one over with the toe of his shoe and studied him for a moment. "All right," he said. "Let's get the guns into the drink, and move." The guns made gentle splashes as they hit.

The men waited a moment longer to make sure there were no footsteps approaching, and then they left. They did not run; they walked away slowly and in silence.

They were silent again for almost two blocks, and then the short man said, "I just can't get that accident out of my mind. Awful thing to see."

"Awful," the blond man said. "I hope they give that driver twenty years. Imagine the bastard—driving fast on a dark night like this." He shook his head. "I better have another talk with my kids first thing tomorrow morning."

JONATHAN CRAIG

JONATHAN CRAIG is best known for his extremely popular novels about police-investigation procedure in New York City, accurate and absorbing books that stem from his intimate and encyclopedic knowledge of the way working cops operate in the big town. This time, however, Craig has turned to the other side of the fence and has come up with a first-rate, offbeat story of a psychopathic killer.

The Scrapbook

OLD CHARLIE STEVENS had just finished trucking the last of the big cartons out to the loading platform, and now he sat on his shipping table, turning a stub of black marking crayon over and over in his short, spatulate fingers and watching Lois Anderson adjust the seams of her stockings.

A girl should wear a garter belt instead of round garters, he reflected, and then her seams wouldn't always be twisting around. Still . . . round garters, if a girl wore them up as high on her legs as Lois wore them, looked a damn sight prettier; you had to give them that.

Lois glanced up at him through her lashes, and smiled. "Shame, Charlie." She laughed. "A man your age."

He grinned at her and looked away, and felt the crayon break between his fingers. She didn't think of him as a man at all, he knew. She made the same mistake all the rest of them did, the mistake he wanted them to make; she thought he was too old to notice a girl's legs. Or anything else. Too old to notice, and too old to do anything about it even if he did.

He stared hard at the calendar over the zoning chart, trying to keep the amusement out of his eyes. She wouldn't have her skirt hiked up like that if she knew about the scrapbook,

he thought. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his silver-rimmed glasses, and then ran the handkerchief back across his bald head and mopped at the wrinkled, sagging flesh back of his neck.

Lois smoothed her skirt down and came over to lean against the edge of the shipping table. "You got a cigarette, Charlie?" she asked.

He gave her a cigarette and lit it for her, watching the way she sucked the smoke deep into her lungs.

"I don't know how you do it," Lois said.

"Do what?"

"All those heavy boxes." She shook her head. "I mean . . . well, a man your age, and all."

"Sixty-one isn't so old," Charlie said. "And besides, handling weight is more knowing how than muscle. You sort of let the weight work for you."

"Well," she said, "anyhow, your vacation starts tomorrow, doesn't it?"

He nodded. She didn't believe he was only sixty-one, he knew.

"We'll miss you while you're gone," she said. "Everyone around here likes you a lot, Charlie."

He didn't say anything. He knew they liked him at Morton's. Everybody from Mr. Morton himself right on down the line liked him. Next to Mr. Morton, he'd been here longer, and worked harder, than anybody else. And each year at vacation time Mr. Morton had come back to the shipping department to tell him to enjoy himself, and to give him an envelope with a fifty-dollar vacation bonus.

Lois dropped her cigarette to the floor and ground it out with her heel. "Got to get back," she said. "The ladies' room is always jammed up at quitting time, and that's why I had to come back here to—"

"Sure," Charlie said. He wondered what Lois' pretty face would look like if he were to take her to his furnished room on West Seventy-third Street and show her the scrapbook. She looked a little like that girl in St. Louis. Let's see . . . that was back in '47. Her name had been Diane Benton, and

he could remember exactly how she had looked when he killed her, and how the picture on the front page of the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* had been blown up from an amateur snapshot so that you couldn't really tell how pretty she was. But there'd been a better picture of her the next day, and that was the one he'd put in his scrapbook.

"Have fun on your vacation, Charlie," Lois said. She smiled at him. "And don't give the girls too bad a time." She moved off toward the door that led to the front office.

He watched the lithe swing of her hips until the door closed behind her. Then he slid off the shipping table and went over to his locker to change into his street clothes. A real pretty girl, he thought. She did look like that girl in St. Louis, all right, but she walked like the one in Baltimore. A girl didn't have to roll her hips that way, and if she did she was really asking for it. But with Lois it was force of habit; she wouldn't waste the motion on him.

He'd just finished knotting his tie when Jack Morton came through the door and strode toward him. He nodded and said, "Hello, Mr. Morton."

"*Mr.* Morton, hell! It's *Jack*, goddam it! Can't you ever remember, you old—" He broke off and laughed, and slapped Charlie on the shoulder. "Well, you all ready?"

"Just about," Charlie said.

"Good," Morton said. He reached into his inside coat pocket and handed Charlie an envelope. "Just got a minute, Charlie, to tell you to have fun." He winked. "I figured you could use a little extra liquor money."

"Thanks," Charlie said.

Morton glanced at his watch. "Forget about this place," he said. "Just concentrate on having a good time. Okay?"

"All right," Charlie said.

Morton slapped him on the shoulder again and hurried back the way he had come.

Charlie turned and picked up his lunch bucket and walked the length of the shipping room to punch the time clock that was reserved for himself and the porter.

Forty-five minutes later, Charlie closed the door of his

third-floor room behind him and locked it, and went directly to the closet where he kept his heavy, brassbound trunk. He dragged the trunk to the middle of the floor, found his key, and knelt down beside it. The padlock in the hasp was nearly as large as his palm, and it was the most expensive he had been able to find. He unlocked it, lifted the tray from the top of the trunk, and reached down beneath a layer of smaller books for his scrapbook.

It was an unusually large book, large enough to hold entire newspaper pages without folding them. He sat cross-legged on the floor, opened the book, and stared at the beautiful girl looking back at him from the front page of the Buffalo *Courier-Express.*

Elaine Bishop had been the first, and one of the youngest. Seventeen. The newspaper had yellowed in the eight years since he'd killed Elaine, but he needed no newspaper photograph to remember how lovely she had been. And the words in the long account of what the *Courier-Express* called "the most brutal sex murder in the history of New England" were as clearly imprinted on his mind as they were in the newspaper columns.

He could remember every detail of Elaine Bishop's murder, and of the seven others that had followed it, as vividly as he could remember his trip home on the Seventh Avenue subway this evening.

He thumbed through the scrapbook slowly and lovingly. Eight of them, he thought. And every one of them a real beauty. One of them for every vacation he'd taken in the last eight years, and no two of them from the same city. He'd spent that first real vacation in Boston, and in the years that followed he had gone to St. Louis and Baltimore and Richmond and Philadelphia and Cleveland and Pittsburgh and Miami. Eight beautiful young girls in eight years, and never a single hitch. Two of the girls had succeeded in clawing him a little before he killed them, and that girl in Richmond—that Gloria Roberts—had kneed him pretty bad; but that was all.

He'd always been able to come back to New York feeling like another man, ready to start planning and saving for the

vacation next year. And along with his savings and plans, his anticipation had always mounted steadily until when vacation time finally came, the urgent need to rape and kill had become the only thing in his mind. Between vacations he talked to only the girls at Morton's.

It had been wonderful to come back to his job and listen to what everybody said about the horrible out-of-town sex crimes. He'd always gotten such a kick out of shaking his head sadly with the best of them, and muttering about what he'd like to do with such a fiend—if he were a younger man, of course.

He glanced at the alarm clock on the dresser. He'd better get started, he thought. He didn't want to get to Washington, D.C., too late. . . .

Charlie turned the rented Plymouth into Massachusetts Avenue and drove slowly along beneath the high-vaulted arch of the overhanging trees. At three o'clock in the morning Washington, D.C., was more like a country town than a city. And after the surge and thrust and pace of Manhattan, Charlie found the quiet, deserted streets irritating. He remembered that someone had told him Washington after midnight was like a cemetery with lights.

He turned the corner at Sixteenth Street and pulled to the curb. He lit a cigarette and smoked it down, and had almost decided to give up for the night when a Buick convertible passed him and pulled to a stop a few yards ahead. He watched while a girl jumped from the car, slammed the door behind her angrily, and started up the walk to an apartment house. The man behind the wheel of the Buick called something after her in a bitter voice, raced the motor, and jerked the car away from the curb. It careened around the next corner.

Charlie could see the girl plainly in the light from the medieval lanterns at either side of the apartment-house entrance. She was young and she was pretty, and the body beneath her tight-waisted summer dress brought a taut, dry feeling to his throat. He slid across the front seat and opened

the door and walked toward the apartment house. He didn't hurry, and the look he cast both ways along the street was casual.

The girl was standing in front of the elevator doors. Her finger was still on the self-service button, and she was even younger and prettier than Charlie had thought. She glanced at him with wide-set, angry blue eyes, and then jabbed at the button again. Her face was flushed, and her sharp, high breasts quivered a little with the movement of her body as she stepped back suddenly to look up at the floor indicator.

After that first glance she paid no further attention to Charlie. Why should she? he thought. An old man . . . too old for anything.

He was close enough to her to smell the clean, soapy scent of her hair before she noticed him again. And then it was too late.

There was no sound. He stood back and looked down at her, and gently massaged his right thumb with the fingers of his left hand. It took a lot of pressure to keep your thumb in a girl's throat long enough to kill her. But it was the best way, he'd discovered. He didn't like to mark up a pretty girl any more than he had to—anyhow, not till later. Right now, and for the next hour or so, he wanted this blue-eyed teenager exactly the way she was.

He picked her up and carried her to the door. When he was certain the street was clear he walked rapidly to the Plymouth and put the girl on the back seat. Midway between Washington and Baltimore there was an abandoned side road he knew about. It would be as good a place as any.

On his first morning back at work, Charlie punched the time clock and walked out into the main office in search of Lois Anderson. He could always depend on Lois for a highly emotional reaction to his murders, and he liked the way she had of inventing little details of her own to make the story even more sensational. He found her near the water cooler, talking to two of the other girls. There was a folded newspaper under her arm.

"Welcome back, Charlie," Lois said, and then, in almost the same breath, "Isn't it horrible?"

Charlie nodded and drew a paper cup of water. "What kind of a man would do a thing like that?" he said, and shook his head. "Inhuman, that's what it is."

Lois glanced at him quickly. "I mean about the fire, Charlie. The one in the tenement over in Brooklyn."

"Fire?" Charlie said.

"You know. Last night. Two people dead, and three more of them not expected to live."

"Oh," Charlie said. He dropped the paper cup in the receptacle and cleared his throat. "I thought you meant about that girl in Washington. If you ask me, a fiend like that should . . ." He let his voice trail off, glowering at the floor.

"That was pretty bad, all right," Lois said. "But they'll get him sooner or later." She unfolded the newspaper and pointed to a photograph on the first page. "Those firemen take some terrible chances, don't they? Look at this one here, on the top of the ladder."

One of the other girls said, "Just think of it. Those poor people. Like rats in a trap."

Charlie drew another cup of water and drank it slowly. "They said that maniac in Washington killed her one place and . . . well, you know . . . he did that someplace else. I didn't get a chance to read much about it." He looked at Lois expectantly.

"They'll get him," Lois said. She folded the newspaper again. "The city ought to do something about all those fire-traps. They ought to make the landlords put in fire escapes for every room." The other girls nodded, and walked back toward their desks.

Charlie crumpled his paper cup into a small ball and rolled it around in his clenched fist. "I read that girl's name, but I can't remember it."

"Who?" Lois said.

"The one in Washington," Charlie said. "The one—"

"Oh," Lois said. "Well, it doesn't make much difference

now. Look, Charlie, Mr. Morton told me he wanted to see you as soon as you got in this morning. I forgot till just now."

Charlie stared at the newspaper beneath Lois' arm, and nodded. "All right," he said.

"It's nice having you back, Charlie," Lois said, and walked over toward the bank of bookkeeping machines.

Charlie stared after her a moment, feeling a strange sort of emptiness inside him. He let his breath out slowly and started toward Mr. Morton's office. That Lois wouldn't be so interested in fires if she knew who she'd just been talking to, he thought. And those other girls, too. Getting all worked up over a little fire. If they knew they'd been standing just two feet from . . . He remembered he was still holding the paper cup, and tossed it toward the nearest wastebasket.

He opened the door to Mr. Morton's office and stepped inside.

Morton looked up and smiled. "Good to see you back, Charlie," he said. "Things really got fouled up while you were gone. The guy we got to take your place didn't know his backside from a hole in the ground." He picked up a handful of bills of lading. "See what you can do to straighten these out, eh?"

Charlie took the bills of lading. There was a newspaper on Morton's desk, he saw. And it was the right one. It was the one with the girl's picture on the first page.

He gestured toward the newspaper with his free hand. "An awful thing."

"What's that?" Morton asked. "And Charlie, about those—"

"That girl getting it that way in Washington," Charlie said. "An awful thing." He fixed his eyes on the knot in Morton's tie. "You've got a daughter about the same age, haven't you, Mr. Morton? About eighteen?"

"Sixteen," Morton said. "There's a couple of back orders in that stack, Charlie. See if the stuff's come through yet."

Charlie moistened his lips. "If I was that girl's dad, I'd spend the rest of my life hunting the guy that did it. And when I found him . . ." He looked at Morton and smiled grimly. "You say your girl's sixteen, Mr. Morton?"

Morton lifted a sheet of paper from his desk and extended it to Charlie. "Here's one more, Charlie. Got loose from the others, somehow."

Charlie took the bill of lading. The palms of his hands were moist now; the air in here was too close and warm.

Morton looked at him questioningly. "Everything okay, Charlie?"

Charlie tucked the bills of lading beneath his arm and dried his palms against his trouser legs. "Sure," he said. "Everything's fine, Mr. Morton."

Morton rattled some papers on his desk. "I guess that's it, then, Charlie."

Charlie nodded and left the office. On his way back to the shipping department he stopped at the water cooler for another cup of water. For the first time in years he was not in the mood to work. Everything seemed wrong, somehow. It had never been this way before when he'd come back from his vacation.

He went to his shipping table and tried to work on the bills of lading. But it was no good. He couldn't concentrate, and half the time the figures blurred before his eyes so that he couldn't see them at all. He put the bills of lading aside and began shifting the heavy cartons from one end of the room to the other. They didn't need shifting, but it gave him something to do with his hands, an excuse to bring his muscles into play. He worked savagely, building up a sweat. After an hour of it he felt no better than he had before.

They'd cheated him, by God. Lois, and Mr. Morton, and the rest of them. A fire in a tenement and a bunch of fouled up bills of lading, and they forgot all about what had happened in Washington. What was the good in doing what he'd done if they didn't even want to talk about it? Hell, they'd talked it all out before he got back. That was it. They'd talked it all out of their systems Friday, and here it was Monday—and now all the hell they cared about was a couple of burned up bastards in a tenement and a bunch of screwed up bills of lading. By God, they'd talk out of the other side

of their face if he ever spread that scrapbook out in front of them!

And those girls. Nine of them now. They'd had their pictures in the papers. Every one of them. But he had not. He was responsible for all the attention they'd had. Millions of people had looked at their pictures, read about them. And what had it got him? Nothing. If other people didn't know you were responsible, it didn't mean a thing.

He took off his glasses and wiped them, and then he went back out to the main office. He went over to Lois, breathing heavily, conscious of the sweat that crawled along his ribs and the insides of his arms.

Lois glanced up at him and smiled. "I'm real busy, Charlie. . . ."

Charlie nodded. "I know. But I got to thinking." The inside of his mouth felt drawn and dry. "What kind of a guy do you figure he was?"

She frowned. "Who, Charlie?"

"That guy in Washington," he said tightly. "The one that killed that little girl. What kind of a guy do you figure he was?"

"How would I know?" she said. "For heaven's sake, Charlie. . . . Can't you see I'm busy?"

"But not too busy to talk about that fire," Charlie said. "You weren't too busy to talk about that, Lois."

Her eyes widened. "Charlie! What's wrong with you?" He turned his back on her and strode toward the street door. There was only one thing to do now, he knew.

He hailed the first taxi that cruised past him and gave the driver the number of his rooming house.

When Charlie got back to Morton's, he was more excited than he had ever been before. Everything was going to be different now. No one in the history of the country had ever done what he had. He had read hundreds of cases, but nobody before had even come close to him. His name would go down for all time. And not after he was dead, either, by God. Not after he couldn't enjoy it.

He went straight to Lois Anderson's desk and slammed the big scrapbook down in front of her. She glanced at it, and then looked up at him, puzzled. "Charlie, what—"

"It was me," Charlie said. "I killed them. I killed every goddam one of them!" He knew he was shouting now, and didn't care.

He looked about him. Every face in the room was turned toward him.

"Come here, you bastards!" Charlie yelled. "Come here and look at this!"

CRAIG RICE

HERE'S ANOTHER CRAIG who stepped off the usual path to do a fine story for *Manhunt*: the late Craig Rice, who usually spent her time chronicling the activities of a famous little defense attorney named John J. Malone. Miss Rice wrote many top-level stories in her brief lifetime, but in the opinion of the editors of this anthology, this grim and bitter story of a girl in prison tops them all.

Quiet Day in the County Jail

"CUT THAT SINGING OUT, Artie," the girl's voice called.

Artie, the head trusty, put down his guitar and walked into the cell that was half of what had been named the Presidential Suite. It was unlocked, because its tenant was only being held in protective custody as a material witness.

"What's the matter, Red?" he asked gently. "You nervous?"

She was beautiful, and she was pale, and she did seem too young and too fair to die. She was sitting on the edge of her bunk, wrapped in a green chenille bathrobe. The hair that had given her her nickname was loose over her shoulders. A cigarette blazed between her trembling fingers.

"Shadow fell over my tombstone, I guess," she said. "Forget it."

He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder and said, "You'd better get some sleep while you can." Right away he knew that had been the wrong thing to say, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

She looked at him with eyes that for a moment were bright with fear. "You don't need to remind me. They can't let me get back to Detroit alive."

"Shut up, Red," he said, even more gently. "That isn't what

I meant." His voice managed to get back to normal. "I mean they're bringing in Aggie."

"Hot damn!" A smile and a little color came back to her face. "Well," she said thoughtfully, "the jail does need a good cleaning." She crushed out her cigarette in the fruit-jar top that served as an ash tray. "Artie, is there a drink anywhere in the house?"

"Need one?" He looked at her, a mixture of admiration, brotherly affection, sympathy, and a touch of fear. "We confiscated a pint of gin off a guy. Most of it's left. I'll get it."

Her lower lip was trembling almost as much as her pale fingers.

"Red, kid," he said softly, "you're in the safest place in the world. Jail, that is. Everything is going to be all right."

He grinned at her reassuringly, paused at the door, and burst into song again.

"The sheriff spoke in a quiet tone,
She seemed so beautiful and so young,
As he said, 'Tonight you're all alone,
And tomorrow you must be hung—'"

He ducked the folded magazine she threw at him and said, "Take it easy, Red. Even the President doesn't have a better bodyguard. I'll be right back."

The Santa Maria County Jail was as informal as a Sunday-school picnic, and on week-ends and holidays, twice as noisy. Small and fitted with only the essentials, it filled the second floor of the police station. The Presidential Suite consisted of two cells in a far corner reserved for women, juveniles, and special prisoners. Right now Red had it to herself.

Because she wasn't, strictly speaking, a prisoner and because she had her bankroll with her, the cell had sheets, a pillow, and pillow case. Her expensive clothes were carefully placed on hangers. And because Red was a friendly person, a bunch of blue flowers smiled from a jelly glass on an improvised table that had been made of two suitcases and a length of board.

Artie came back, his hand under his tan jacket. The cell was in semidarkness; Red was still sitting on the edge of the bunk. He picked up the white enameled cup from the washstand, poured in a generous drink, added a little water, and handed it to her.

"Dirty trick," Red said. "Toss a guy in the can and then take his gin away."

"He won't miss it," Artie assured her. "He's the mayor's second cousin, and he's got eighteen dollars on deposit downstairs." He added, "You'd better keep the bottle."

"I may need it," she said. She looked up at him, six foot if he was half an inch, crew-cut blond hair, a deeply lined face. She slid the bottle between the mattresses of the bunk across from her, downed the contents of the cup fast, choked, and gasped, *"Water!"*

Artie rushed it to her. "Next time, hold your breath." He paused. "Red, you aren't really scared, are you?"

"Who, me?" she said, turning her eyes away. Her hands shook as she gulped the water, and half of it spilled on the floor.

"Red, kid," he said, taking the cup from her hands. "All you got to do is wait till they take you back to Detroit, just for you to testify. Then you're in the clear."

"They'll never let me get to that courtroom," she said, very quietly.

"Don't talk silly," Artie said. "You'll be protected. You'll be safe."

Their eyes met. They were both lying, and they both knew it.

She turned away first, punched up her pillow, lit a cigarette, and said, "Let's talk about you. What happens? I saw your lawyer come up here yesterday."

"The case comes up week after next," Artie said. "If the judge gets well, that is. The county's only got two judges, and one of 'em's sick. Two thousand cases were ahead of me, but they got it down to one thousand nine hundred and forty-four. When this other judge gets over his tonsillitis, or ulcers, or beri beri, or whatever it is, I'm first on the calendar.

It'll be a short trial. They reduced the charge to manslaughter, and my lawyer's charging self-defense."

He blew his nose, lit a cigarette. "Red," he said, "I love my wife. She wrote me every day I was in the South Pacific. I love my kids. She brings them to see me every Sunday. I have a nice little ranch, I'm building up a trucking business. I met this guy, he came over to my house, the wife and kids were up visiting her mother, we had a few beers. He went wild and pulled a gun on me. I tried to take it away from him, and it went off."

Red reached between the mattresses for the bottle, poured a generous two inches into the cup, and handed it to Artie. She had a hunch it was he who needed moral support now.

"You'll get off," she told him. "They may even give you a bounty."

That got a laugh out of him, which was what she wanted. He flicked the ash from his cigarette and said, "Hell, it hasn't been too bad here, these eleven months. Since I been a trusty, I got the run of the place. I go out and do marketing, run errands, eat good and sleep good. Could be worse."

She said with a tired quietness, "I'd rather be here than dead in the streets."

"Red, you quit that kind of talk."

"They got to get me before I can testify," she said.

"I told you before, you're in the safest place in the world."

Suddenly the jail seemed to shake. There were sounds from downstairs just a little louder than the Bronx Zoo at feeding time, and about the same pitch.

"That would be Aggie," Red said.

"Couldn't be anyone else." Artie grinned. He rose, locked her cell door, and said, "Sorry I have to do this, but it's only for a few minutes." He called, "Hey, Pablo!"

Red settled down on her bunk and listened to the rumpus. Aggie was resisting arrest in two languages, and from the sounds, it was taking both trusties and Fred, the night jailer, to hold her.

Aggie was probably the best cleaning woman in Santa Maria. She was also probably the loudest drunk. She was

happy with a bottle, she was just as happy with a pail of soap and water and a mop. Periodically when the jail needed a thorough scrubbing, the word went down the line, "Tour the bars and pick up Aggie."

Aggie always was brought into the jail sounding like a combination of a major riot and a bomb landing in the next block. Next morning the judge invariably sentenced her to six days, which could be worked out in three, and Aggie, cheerful if slightly hung over, filled a pail with soap and hot water and reached for the nearest mop.

Red put her fingers in her ears as Aggie was shoved into the next-door cell and locked in. Aggie went right on shouting.

Artie unlocked the metal grill door to Red's room and said, "You asleep?"

"Slept right through it," Red said cheerfully.

The other trusty, the small, sad-eyed Pablo, came in with Artie. "This we take from Aggie," he said gravely.

The bottle was passed around solemnly. Red shuddered. "Can't these cops ever arrest anybody with champagne?"

"Me, I like Scotch," Artie said.

She passed the bottle to him. "Shut your eyes and pretend that it's Scotch."

There was more noise from the cell next door.

"That Aggie, she makes with the yell," Pablo said.

"I make with the yell myself," Red said grimly. She raised her voice. "Shut up!"

There was a moment's silence, and then an answering yell. "You're who, and what'cha here for?"

"I'm the ax killer you been reading about in the papers," Red called. "And I've got the ax right here, the one I chopped up seven people with. The police let me keep it because I know the mayor. And my cell door is unlocked, and I've got a key to yours, and I like it quiet when I sleep."

There was a long and what promised to be a nightlong silence.

Artie and Pablo waved good night and went away.

That was at four A.M.

By eight o'clock in the morning, the sun had been turning the heat on for an hour and a half. Red stirred restlessly, felt a hand pat her shoulder gently, turned over and opened her eyes.

It was Fred, the night jailer. "Going off duty now, Red. Just came by to say good-by and wish you luck."

Suddenly wide awake, she sat up, pulling the blankets around her shoulders. "What do you mean, good-by?"

Fred looked embarrassed. "I thought they were moving you out today."

"Nobody's told me yet," she said. She didn't need to look in a mirror; she could feel her face turning pale.

"Well," he said, "well, in case they do. Good luck. Don't worry, Red. Come back and visit us when it's all over."

"Sure will," she said heartily. "I'll do just that little thing."

He knew she'd never be back in Santa Maria, and so did she.

They shook hands. She said, "Fred, please thank your wife for sending me the flowers." Flowers for a corpse that was still walking around and talking. "Wait a minute, will you?"

She reached for her robe, wrapped it around her, slid off the bunk, and rummaged through the suitcase that was under the bed, until she pulled out what looked like a handful of tissue paper. She sat on the edge of the bunk, untangled the tissue paper, and pulled out a brooch. It blazed green, yellow, and white fire in the early-morning sunlight.

"Please give this to her. It's a phony, just a hunk of costume jewelry, but I think it's pretty. The one thing that isn't phony is the thanks to her that go with it."

"Gosh, Red," Fred said. He choked for a minute, rewrapped the brooch in the tissue paper, and stuck it in his pocket. "Gosh." He paused again. "She wanted to send you some more flowers."

"Tell her to save them for my wake," Red said, managing to keep her voice light. She walked over to the window and stood looking out.

Fred stood for a moment, uncertainty drawn on his broad red face. Finally he walked over and put a hand on her arm.

"Red," he said, feeling for words, "if—I mean, if something happens to you—I mean, well, I got friends, we'll find out who did it—"

She turned around, smiling. "Thanks. Now beat it, bum. I've got to get some sleep."

There was something she vaguely remembered from high school. She fished for it in her mind, and all that came to her was "There is a time to sleep, and a time to stay awake." She knew that wasn't right, but it didn't matter now.

She paced up and down the cell. She scrubbed her face and put on fresh make-up. She combed her lovely red hair until it was smooth and shining. She brushed on lipstick and tended to her eyebrows. She put on a pair of dove-gray slacks, a pale-green sweater, and darker-green sandals.

Eight thirty. She remembered Aggie with a sudden sense of guilt. She raced into the main room and yelled for Artie.

"Honey, open up Aggie's door. She's got to be in court by nine, and I've got to wash her face."

"Will do," he said, reaching for the keys. He looked appreciatively. "You're going to be missed, Red."

Again she could feel the color drain out of her face. "Who says?"

Artie avoided her eyes as he unlocked the door to Aggie's cell. After a moment of inspection and thought, Red went next door and collected a comb, make-up, powder, a lipstick, a big fluffy towel, mouthwash, and the remains of the gin. Five vigorous shakes woke Aggie.

"Come on, kid," Red said. "You've got to be in court in half an hour."

Aggie began moaning. An inch of gin in the enameled cup took care of that. She got her eyes open enough to stay that way on the fourth blink, and said, "Red! You still here?"

"Haven't thrown me out yet," Red said, with false cheerfulness. "Babe, do yourself proud in court. Wash your face, and I'll put your make-up on for you and fix your hair." She looked at Aggie's dress and shook her head sadly.

Well, there was one of her own that just might fit. She was as tall as Aggie, and the dress would stretch sideways.

At two minutes to nine, Aggie was on her way downstairs, hair combed, face made up, smelling slightly of mouthwash and Daphne cologne, and wearing a blue jersey dress that would never shrink back into shape again.

At ten minutes after nine Aggie came back up the stairs, beaming. "Six or three," she shouted. "Artie, where's the mop?"

Red called from her cell, "Artie! Pablo! Somebody!"

It was Artie who came to the door. "A mouse?" he asked.

"I want breakfast," Red said.

"Breakfast is served in this jail at six thirty," Artie said. "But since you slipped Frank a buck yesterday to buy eggs, I think we can oblige you." He winked at her. "He got a dozen eggs stashed away in the refrigerator. And the coffee's good this morning."

It was Pablo who brought in the tin tray. The eggs were cooked just right, the toast was the right color of tan, and the coffee was as good as advertised.

She smiled at Pablo. She always smiled at Pablo. Today she had an extra one.

Pablo was short and slender and black-haired, and he was almost a permanent prisoner. Frank, the day jailer, had confided in Red that Pablo had been serving a thirty-day drunk charge for almost two years. It had become a regular routine. Sentenced to thirty days. Made a trusty the next day. Released. Arrested the next day, or even sooner.

Artie swore, and Red believed him, that Pablo had once made the round trip from the jail and back in exactly three hours.

And it was Artie who'd told her how Pablo's wife had run away with another man, how he'd lost his job and seen the bank take away his home, all in one month.

"Señorita Red," Pablo said, "would you like I should go and buy you cigarettes?"

She looked at him with pretended sternness. "The last time I gave you a quarter to buy me cigarettes you were gone for two days, and the judge tacked an extra thirty days on you when they did find you."

"It was a mistake," Pablo said with great dignity. "Perhaps you could lend me twenty-five cents. Believe me, it is for a good purpose."

She looked at him, and her eyes softened. After all, Pablo had only two homes. The jail, and the Frisco Bar and Grill. She pulled her change purse from under her pillow, took out a fifty-cent piece, and said, "I hope you have a lot of fun with the good purpose."

That was at ten o'clock in the morning.

The routine daily cleaning was going on, plus Aggie throwing a mop around in the kitchen. Red stood looking out the window at the roof of the bowling alley next door. She lifted her eyes to the mountains that ringed the little city and saw a tiny speck of silver racing across the blue. Would they take her out by plane or train, she wondered.

She could hear Artie going through the big cabinet in the main room, sorting out files. She could hear a prisoner rattling tin trays in the kitchen sink. This will be going on long after I'm gone, she thought. Artie will go on sorting files, then his case will come up in court and chances are he'll be freed; the guy in the kitchen will go on washing dishes and serve his sentence and be on his way. But she would be gone before that, far away from here.

A voice said, "Hey, Red."

She turned around. It was Frank, the day jailer. He was a deceptively gentle-looking man with a friendly face, white hair, and a deadly right when he had to use it. He was one more person in the world she would have trusted with her life.

"Chief's on his way up to see you. Thought I'd tell you, case you want to powder your face."

"Bless you, Frank." At that moment she heard the buzzer that announced someone was coming up the stairs.

She was sitting on the edge of her bunk, face powdered, when Chief of Police Sankey came in, Frank close behind him.

"Red," he said. "I mean, Miss—"

"That's all right," she said.

He sat down on the bunk across from her, a worried, fretful little man with reddish hair and rimless glasses.

"Well," he said, "we finally got the word. They're taking you on a plane this afternoon. Papers all signed, everything set."

She opened her mouth to speak, shut it again, and finally managed to say, "I'll be ready."

He looked embarrassed. He said, "You'll be well protected, naturally. So there's nothing for you to worry about." He paused and added, "Well, good luck."

After he'd gone, Frank patted her shoulder and said, "Everything's going to be all right, Red."

"Oh, sure." She forced a smile to her face. "It's just that I like your jail so well that I hate to leave it. Besides, I feel safe here."

He cleared his throat, started to speak, and changed his mind. He patted her shoulder a second time.

"Frank, I saw the whole thing. I was standing right in the doorway of the Blue Casino. Louie did the job himself, and I was right there. All I could think of was to beat it, fast. Threw some stuff in a couple of suitcases, got the first plane to Kansas City. That's where I bought the car and headed south. I could have made it across the border into Mexico easy, but you guys picked me up."

"Maybe it's just as well," Frank told her reassuringly. "This guy would have had you followed. This way he'll get convicted, and then you won't have a thing to worry about."

"Oh, sure," she said again. She sighed. "It's just luck that some goon was coming down the sidewalk and saw what was going on. He didn't get close enough to recognize Louie, but I was standing there with a light smack on my face, and he spotted me. The Detroit cops picked up Louie on general principles and started looking for me."

She ran a hand through her shining red hair. "I'm their only witness. 'Course, I could get on the stand and swear I didn't see a thing, or I could swear it wasn't Louie."

"You could," Frank said. "But—"

"But I wouldn't," she finished for him. "That is, assuming I ever get to the witness stand."

Artie came in, lit a cigarette, and lounged against the wall.

"This Louie," Frank asked, "was he your boyfriend?"

That brought a laugh from her, the first one that day. "I didn't have a boyfriend. I ran the Blue Casino. A gambling joint. I ran that end of it, and my partner ran the night-club end." She grinned at them. "I came by these diamonds honestly, pals."

"So that's why you've been able to take us at blackjack," Artie said lazily.

"Well," Frank said, getting up, "you'll be protected on the way to the plane, and you'll be protected on the plane, and you'll probably be taken off it in an armored car."

Artie pinched out his cigarette, dropped it on the floor. "Pablo'll clean up in here when he gets back. He's got the car out now, getting potatoes."

At that moment all hell broke loose in the yard outside. Red and Artie were tied getting to the window. Artie gave a loud whoop and raced for the stairs, yelling for Frank to work the buzzer.

Outside, Pablo was having troubles. The car used by the jail for general errands was parked directly under Red's window, and the trunk compartment was open. What appeared to be about a hundred white chickens, but were actually only six, were creating the disturbance. Pablo was trying to move them from the trunk compartment to a burlap bag, and the chickens were resisting arrest. The scene was beginning to draw a fair-sized audience when reinforcements, in the person of Artie, arrived.

Between them, the chickens were shoved unceremoniously into the bag and tossed, still protesting loudly, into the car. Artie and Pablo got in and drove off.

Frank, who had watched the last act from Red's window, sighed deeply and said, "Sometimes I think they give these trusties too many liberties."

"None of them give you any trouble, though," Red reminded him.

"That's right," he said, "except sometimes Pablo." He looked at her searchingly. "Did you give him any money?"

"I gave him fifty cents," Red confessed. She added, as though in defense, "After all, Frank, it's my last day here."

Frank shook his head sadly. "Another thirty days. Well, he's got to sleep somewhere."

That was at eleven o'clock.

It was some time later when Artie and Pablo came in triumphantly, Pablo carrying a large paper-wrapped bundle. The chickens were not only silent now, but in addition to losing their voices they had lost their feathers and a few other odds and ends, and were candidates for the frying pan.

"Farewell party!" Artie called happily, heading for the kitchen.

Red looked at her suitcases, at the clothes hanging against the walls, at the make-up carefully arranged on the improvised table, and started a half-hearted effort toward packing. But there was plenty of time for that later. She flopped down on the bunk, picked up a magazine, and tried to read. The words seemed to run together and made no sense at all.

Pablo came in the door. He was completely sober, and walking with great dignity. He carried a package, which he presented to Red with even greater dignity.

"For you," he said. "For a going-far-away present."

She unwrapped it. It was a bottle of what was probably the worst wine in the world. This was the important purpose for which Pablo had needed money. She felt tears hot in her eyes.

"Pablo, I thank you," she said with dignity that matched his. She put the package under the bunk, reached between the mattresses for the last of the gin. "For farewell, will you have a drink with me?"

Pablo's dark eyes brightened. "Since you insist upon it."

She rinsed out the enameled cups and divided the gin equally into them. They saluted each other solemnly and silently.

"We will miss you," Pablo said simply.

That was at twelve o'clock.

It was Artie who brought in her lunch, some time later.

"No stew?" she said, looking up and sniffing. "No pinto beans?"

Artie grinned at her as he set the tray down. "Fried chicken." He shook his head thoughtfully. "That Pablo. It isn't enough that he goes out and steals chickens. But he has to steal the chickens from the chief of police."

He went on. "He was going to bring them up here and clean them, but I had an idea. We took them to a restaurant where I know the kitchen help. Result, no evidence."

It was one o'clock when he came to take the tray away and lock Aggie's door. She was, after all, a prisoner, and even in the Santa Maria County Jail, rules were rules. He paused in Red's cell.

"I'll help you pack, after siesta."

She turned her face away. "I can manage, thanks, Artie."

He sat down on the other bunk. "Red, listen. You'll be protected. There's nothing to it. When you get to Detroit they'll put you up in some expensive hotel, with a bodyguard. You testify, and it's all over. There's nothing for you to be scared of."

"Who's scared?" she scoffed, managing to keep her voice steady.

"Red," he said slowly, "Red. Will you let me kiss you, once?"

She stared at him.

"I been here eleven months, Red. I'd just like to kiss a girl again."

She smiled, and lifted her face to him. He kissed her very gently, almost a little-boy kiss.

"It won't seem like the same place without you, Red."

The county jail became silent. Frank had gone out to lunch, and everyone else was asleep. Everybody except Red. She lay on her bunk, her eyes closed, wondering if she would ever sleep again. Finally she gave up. Might as well pack and get it over with.

Midafternoon sunlight was streaming in the windows of the trusties' room when the sound of the big door clanging shut

and footsteps on the stairs woke Artie. He swung his long legs off the bed, and walked into the main room.

That was at three o'clock.

Frank and a stranger had just reached the top of the stairs.

"Detective Connelly, Detroit police," Frank said, puffing, and nodding toward the stranger. "Red all packed and set to leave?"

"I'll see," Artie said.

Red was sitting on the bunk, her suitcase beside her. She had on a light-beige suit and a small green hat. Her face was very pale. Artie picked up the suitcase. She rose and followed him into the main room.

Pablo had come out of the trusties' room. Aggie, mop in hand, was watching. Everyone was silent.

Red managed a wan smile at the Detroit detective.

"All set?" He tried to smile but didn't look as though he relished this job. She nodded.

Frank said heartily, "Now remember, Red, don't you worry about a thing. He'll take you back, you testify, this Louie will go to jail or the chair, and that's that."

"Sure," Connelly said, with false confidence. "That's the way."

"And you will come back to visit us," Pablo said. "I will still be here."

That eased the tension a little.

There was nothing left to say but good-by. Then Red went down the stairs without looking back, Connelly and Frank on either side. The two trusties stood looking after her.

At last they walked to her cell and looked in. There was a faint odor of cigarette smoke, gin, and expensive perfume. Artie straightened a wrinkle in the blankets.

"It seems so quiet," he said.

Pablo looked under the bed, pulled out the package. "She forgets and leaves it behind," he said sadly, unwrapping it. "I buy it for her, a going-away present." There were tears in his eyes.

"You're a bad boy, Pablo," Aggie said from the doorway.

Pablo looked wistful.

"I think she'd have wanted you to open it," Artie said very gently.

Pablo ripped off the cap. The bottle of the worst wine in the world was passed around in silence.

STANLEY L. COLBERT

THE GUY'S WIFE had turned pro, and the guy had caught her and strangled her, and it would make a good story—but the reporter wasn't even interested. He had troubles of his own.

The Set-Up

IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT, and I sat around the station house, idly thinking that my newspaper needed me here like it needed a hole in its columns, when the homicide call came in.

Perkins, from the *Globe-Press*, jumped up and grabbed the address from the desk sergeant, and said, "C'mon, I got my car outside. The company pays for the gas and the burned rubber."

I nodded, and we headed for the car. Perkins revved it, made a sharp left turn out of the police lot, and we were off.

"Ain't we got fun?" he asked, driving with one hand and buttoning his shirt collar with the other.

"Drop dead," I said. Mechanically, I watched him fumble with the button and then the tie, but my mind was a million and a half miles away.

"A ten says we get a front-page story this time. I've got a hunch." Perkins was young, and he chattered the way he always did when there was the scent of excitement.

"Just think about driving the car and we'll be all right," I told him.

I would have taken the punk's money easy enough if I'd had ten bucks to cover the bet, but I didn't have a sou to my name. My paycheck was sliced up more ways than a restaurant pie, and between the bookies, bartenders, and a chick named Francie, who knew how to drive me half-crazy, I was in hock up to my elbows.

"You ain't listening," Perkins said, as we slowed down behind a bus driver who acted like he had an inside tip that his

company owned Eighth Avenue from curb to curb. "I asked you if you thought it might be a perfect crime. I never covered one of those."

"Naw, you've been reading too many mysteries. Why don't you try comic books for a change; they're educational, help you in your job." He looked grumpy, and maybe for a few minutes he'd let me alone. I hoped so. I had been thinking about Francie all evening, and I couldn't stop. I had to figure out something to tell her tonight.

She was a nice kid when you had the old mazuma, but when your pockets dried up, so did she. When the horses were hitting she couldn't get close enough. Now that nothing was hitting she was going to cut me off. I couldn't let her go. Never mind what was wrong with her. I had to come up with some awful good promises tonight when I saw her, or some awfully good dough.

Perkins turned to me. "I read comic books, too. So what?" he said.

"Keep it up," I said. "That's how guys become managing editors, just reading comic books, that's all. Now get off my back, Junior."

He didn't open his mouth for the next five minutes, and I didn't say anything, either. I just sat there trying to think of something, but nothing came up that sounded like quick money in the bank.

We pulled up sharply in front of a brownstone house in a neighborhood that couldn't make up its mind about whether or not it was respectable. We were about twenty seconds behind the prowl car. Half-heartedly I stepped out and acted like a reporter. We didn't have to get past the vestibule to find out what happened and who did it. Standing by the hall pay phone was a mangy character, sobbing, surrounded by a bunch of people who didn't seem to speak English. He did, though, and you couldn't stop him from talking once he saw Kozlewski, the cop, a few steps ahead of us.

"Me! I did it!" he screamed. "I killed her like this—" He shot his hands out in the air and clenched an imaginary throat, shaking as if he had the chills.

Perkins turned to me and grabbed my arm. "He must have strangled her," he said. Sometimes this Perkins acts like he's brilliant.

Kozlewski knew me from before, and he nodded, which meant I'd better get his name spelled right. Then he turned to the crowd bunched in around us. "Vamoose. Scram. Get lost," he said. He held his man firmly. "Now, speak slow, Buster, so I can understand you, and start from the beginning." Perkins and I reached for notebooks. This character started talking.

"I came home tonight from work," he said. "It was a little earlier than usual, but still it was late. I work a funny shift.

"I started up the stairs to our apartment. Halfway up I saw a man just leaving our door. I thought maybe he was selling something, so I didn't think too much of it. When I walked in my wife looked surprised. She was just putting away a bottle and carrying two glasses into the kitchen. She was only wearing a housecoat. It was open all the way. She had nothing under it."

He had to stop to compose himself. The poor slob. In a second he was ready to continue.

"I asked her who the guy was and what was happening. She shrugged her shoulders and said something about me not bringing home enough money to give her what she wanted and she knew how to make it. All of a sudden like that she said it to me. I don't remember what I said. I grabbed her neck and squeezed until she turned blue and fell to the floor. I couldn't run away. I came downstairs and called the police."

He had to lean against the wall. The small hallway was smoky and booming with chatter. Kozlewski motioned to a fat old lady who was clucking away.

"Which apartment is his?" he asked. She pointed upstairs and said, "Number Two."

Kozlewski grabbed this character by the arm, and we all headed upstairs. He probably figured when the detectives came they'd ask about the place and he'd better look it over. Very thorough, I thought, especially on an open-and-shut case.

He took a quick look at the not-so-pretty body on the floor and let his eyes wander over the room. It was sloppy, but nothing unusual.

"Okay," Kozlewski said. "Let's head back downstairs so I can call in." The character was still whimpering. I turned to Perkins and muttered, "You head down and see if you can get some quotes from the guy. I'll stay here for a minute and see if I can pick up notes on the room and maybe find a picture of the babe. We can swap later."

It sounded all right to Perkins, and Kozlewski didn't argue because he still wanted his name spelled right.

When they left I looked around. There was a bureau in the far corner with a drawer slightly open. I walked over to it and started to leaf through the drawer.

Halfway down, under some sweaters and slips, my hand touched something and suddenly turned to ice. It was a roll of bills. We're back in business, Francie, I thought to myself. Instinctively I looked to the door, but no one was there. I started to edge the money toward my pocket. Then, as I turned my head back, I glanced into the mirror over the dresser.

My back grew prickly, and the short hairs on my spine played pingpong with the balls of sweat that suddenly appeared there. She was moving. Sitting up and rubbing her throat. Watching me, staring at the green bundle in my hand. In another second she'd be composed enough to scream, "Thief!"

I shoved the money in my pocket and took three quick steps toward her, cursing the weak joker downstairs who didn't know he was crying over nothing. Then I found my hands were clutching her bluemarked throat until my fingers were like white pieces of steel twined around her neck. I smiled as I thought for a second about Perkins and his perfect crime. "You aren't gonna holler, sister," I heard myself muttering. "No cheap tramp is gonna make me lose my girl."

RICHARD S. PRATHER

RICHARD S. PRATHER is a young Californian who may well be the largest-selling writer in the world in a few years; he is certainly headed in that direction now. His novels about private detective Shell Scott are so eagerly snapped up that his publishers, normally a conservative bunch, issue a first printing of a million copies on his new books and keep going back to the presses with equally huge printings on his past books; his novels are best sellers in translation in a dozen foreign countries; and his total sales now approach the twenty-million-copy mark. If you haven't already met the light-hearted Mr. Prather and his battered-faced, white-thatched creation, here's an introduction now.

The Double Take

THIS WAS A MORNING for weeping at funerals, for sticking pins in your own wax image, for leaping into empty graves and pulling the sod in after you. Last night I had been at a party with some friends here in Los Angeles, and I had drunk bourbon and Scotch and martinis and maybe even swamp water from highball glasses, and now my brain was a bomb that went off twice a second.

I thought thirstily of Pete's Bar downstairs on Broadway, right next door to this building, the Hamilton, where I have my detective agency, then got out of my chair, left the office, and locked the door behind me. I was Shell Scott, the Bloodshot Eye, and I needed a hair of the horse that bit me.

Before I went downstairs I stopped by the PBX switchboard at the end of the hall. Cute little Hazel glanced up.

"You look terrible," she said.

"I know. I think I'm decomposing. Listen, a client just

phoned me and I have to rush out to the Hollywood Roosevelt. I'll be back in an hour or so, but for the next five minutes I'll be in Pete's. Hold down the fort, huh?"

"Sure, Shell. Pete's?" She shook her head.

I tried to grin at her, whereupon she shrank back and covered her eyes, and I left. Hazel is a sweet kid, tiny and curvy, and since mine is a one-man agency with no receptionist or secretary, the good gal tries to keep informed of my whereabouts.

I tottered down the one flight of stairs into bright June sunshine on Broadway, thinking that my client would have to wait an extra five minutes even though he'd been in a hell of a hurry. But he'd been in a hurry the last time, too, and nothing had come of it. This Frank Harrison had first called me on Monday morning, three days ago, and insisted I come right out to his hotel in Hollywood. When I got there he explained that he was having marital troubles and wanted me to tail his wife and see if I could catch her in any indiscretions. When I told him I seldom handled that kind of job, he'd said to forget it, so I had. The deal had seemed screwy; he'd not only been vague, but hadn't pressed me much to take the case. It had added up to an hour wasted, and no fee.

But this morning when I'd opened the office at nine sharp the phone had been ringing and it was Harrison again. He wanted me right away this time, too, but he had a real case for me, he said, not like last time, and it wasn't tailing his wife. He was in a sweat to get me out to the Roosevelt's bar, the Cinegrill, where we were to meet, and was willing to pay me fifty bucks just to listen to his story. I still didn't know what was up, but it sounded like a big one. I hoped it was bigger than the last "job," and anyway, it couldn't be as big as my head. I went into Pete's.

Pete knew what I wanted as soon as I perched on a stool and he got a good look at my eyeballs, so he immediately mixed the ghastly concoction he gives me for hangovers. I was halfway through it when his phone rang.

He listened a moment, said, "I'll tell him," then turned to

me. "That was Hazel," he said. "Some dame was up there looking for you. A wild woman—"

That was as far as he got. I heard somebody come inside the front door, and high heels clicked rapidly over the floor and stopped alongside me. A woman's voice, tight and angry, said, "There you are, you, you . . . you crook!" and I turned on my stool to look at the wild woman.

I had never seen her before, but that was obviously one of the most unfortunate omissions of my life, because one look at her and I forgot my hangover. She was an absolutely gorgeous little doll, about five feet two inches tall, and any half-dozen of her sixty-two delightful inches would make any man stare, and all of her at once was enough to knock a man's eyes out through the back of his head.

"Oh!" she said. "You ought to be tarred and feathered."

I kept looking. Coal-black hair was fluffed around her oval face, and though she couldn't have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five years old, a thin streak of gray ran back from her forehead through that thick, glossy hair. She was dressed in light-blue clamdiggers and a man's white shirt, which her chest filled out better than any man's ever did, and her eyes were an incredibly light electric blue shooting sparks at me.

She was angry. She was so hot she looked ready to melt. It seemed, for some strange reason, she was angry with me. This lovely was not one I wanted angry with me; I wanted her happy, and patting my cheek, or perhaps even chewing on my ear.

She looked at the light-blond, almost white hair that sticks up about an inch from my scalp, then at my whitish eyebrows and slightly bent nose, looked me up and down and said, "Yes. Yes, you're Shell Scott."

"That's right. Certainly. But—"

"I want that twenty-four thousand dollars and I'm going to get it if I—if I have to *kill* you! I mean it!"

"Huh?"

"It's just money to you, you crook! But it's all he had, all my father's saved in years and years. Folsom's Market, in-

deed! I'll kill you, I *will!* So give me that money. I know you're in with them."

My head was in very bad shape to begin with, but now I was beginning to think maybe I had mush up there. She hadn't yet said a single word that made sense.

"Take it easy," I said. "You must have the wrong guy."

If anything, that remark made her angrier. She pressed white teeth together and made noises in her throat. Then she said, "I suppose you're not Shell Scott."

"Sure I am, but I don't know what you're babbling about."

"Babbling! *Babbling!* Ho, that's the way you're going to play it, are you? Going to deny everything, pretend it never happened! I knew you would! Well . . ."

She backed away from me, fumbling with the clasp of a big handbag. I looked at her, thinking that one of us was completely mad. Then she dug into her bag and pulled out a chromed pistol, probably a .22 target pistol, and pointed it at me. She was crying now, her face twisted up and tears running down her cheeks, but she still appeared to be getting angrier every second, and slowly the thought seeped into my brain: this tomato is aiming a real gun at me.

She backed away toward the rear of Pete's, but she was still too close to suit me, and close enough so I could see her eyes squeeze shut and her finger tighten on the trigger. I heard the crack of the little gun, and I heard a guy who had just come in the door let out a yelp behind me, and I heard a little tinkle of glass. And then I heard a great clattering and crashing of glass, because by this time I was clear over behind the bar with Pete, banging into bottles and glasses on my way down to the floor. I heard the gun crack twice more, and then high heels clattered away from me and I peeked over the bar just in time to see the gal disappearing into the ladies' room.

A man on my left yelled, "Janet! *Jan!*" I looked at him just as he got up off the floor, and I remembered the guy who had yelped right after that first shot. He didn't seem to be hurt, though, because he got to his feet and started after the beautiful, crazy gal.

He was a husky man, about five-ten, wearing brown slacks

and a T-shirt that showed off his impressive chest. Even so, it wasn't as impressive as the last chest I'd seen, and although less than a minute had elapsed since I'd first seen the gal who'd been behind it, I was already understandably curious about her. I vaulted over the bar and yelled at the man, "Hey, you! Hold it!"

He stopped and jerked his head around as I stepped up in front of him. His slightly effeminate face didn't quite go with the masculine build, but many women would probably have called him "handsome" or even "darling." A thick mass of black curly hair came down in a sharp widow's peak on his white forehead. His mouth was full, chin square and dimpled, and large, black-lashed brown eyes blinked at me.

"Who the hell was that tomato?" I asked him. "And what's happening?"

"You tell me," he said. And then an odd thing happened. He hadn't yet had time to take a good look at me, but he took it now. He gawked at my white hair, my face, blinked, and his mouth dropped open. "Oh, *Christ!*" he said, and then he took off. Naturally, he ran into the ladies' rest room. It just wouldn't have seemed right at that point if he'd gone anyplace else.

I looked over my shoulder at Pete, whose mouth was hanging completely ajar, then I went to the ladies' room and inside. Nobody was there. A wall window was open, and I looked out through it at the empty alley, then looked all around the rest room again, but it was still empty.

I went back to the bar and said, "Pete, what the hell did you put in that drink?"

He stared at me, shaking his head. Finally he said, "I never seen nothing like that in my life. Thirteen years I've run this place, but . . ." He didn't finish it.

My hand was stinging and so was a spot on my chin. Going over the bar, I had broken a few bottles and cut my left hand slightly, and one of those little slugs had apparently come close enough to nick my chin. I had also soaked up a considerable amount of spilled whisky in my clothes, and I

didn't smell good at all. My head hadn't been helped, either, by the activity.

Pete nodded when I told him to figure up the damage and I'd pay him later. Then I went back into the Hamilton Building. It appeared Frank Harrison would have to wait. Also, the way things were going, I wanted to get the .38 Colt Special and harness out of my desk.

At the top of the stairs I walked down to the PBX again. Hazel, busy at the switchboard, didn't see me come up, but when I spoke she swung around. "What's with that gal you called Pete's about?" I asked her.

"She find you? Wasn't she a beautiful little thing?"

"Yeah. And she found me."

Hazel's nose was wrinkling. "You *are* decomposing," she said. "Into bourbon. How many shots did you have?"

"Three, I think. But they all missed me."

"Missed you, ha—"

"Shots that beautiful little thing took at me, I mean. With a gun."

Hazel blinked. "You're kidding." I shook my head, and she said, "Well, I—she did seem upset, a little on edge."

"She was clear the hell over the edge. What did she say?"

"She asked for you. As a matter of fact, she said, 'Where's that dirty Shell Scott?' I told her you'd gone to Pete's downstairs"—Hazel smiled sweetly—"for some medicine, and she ran away like mad. She seemed very excited."

"She was."

"And a man came rushing up here a minute or two after the girl and asked about her. I said I'd sent her to Pete's—and *he* ran off." She shook her head. "I don't know. I'm a little confused."

That I could understand. Maybe it was something in the L.A. air this morning. I thanked Hazel and walked down to the office, fishing out my keys, but when I got there I noticed the door was already cracked. I shoved it open and walked inside. For the second or third time this morning my jaw dropped open. A guy was seated behind my desk, fussing with some papers on its top, looking businesslike as all hell.

He was a big guy, husky, around thirty years old, with white hair sticking up into the air about an inch.

Without looking up, he said, "Be right with you."

I walked to the desk and sank into one of the leather chairs in front of it, a chair I bought for clients to sit in. If the chair had raised up and floated me out of the window while violins played in the distance, my stunned expression would not have changed one iota. In a not very strong voice I said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Shell Scott," he said briskly, glancing up at me.

Ah, yes. That explained it. He was Shell Scott. Now I knew what was wrong. I had gone crazy. My mind had snapped. For a while there I'd thought *I* was Shell Scott.

But slowly reason filtered into my throbbing head again. I'd had all the mad episodes I cared for this morning, and here was a guy I could get my hands on. He was looking squarely at me now, and if ever a man suddenly appeared scared green, this one did. Except for the short white hair and the fact that he was about my size, he didn't resemble me much, and right now he looked sick. I got up and leaned on the desk and shoved my face at him.

"That's interesting," I said pleasantly. "I, too, am Shell Scott."

He let out a grunt and started to get up fast, but I reached out and grabbed a bunch of shirt and tie and throat in my right fist and I yanked him halfway across the desk.

"Okay, you smart sonofabitch," I said, "Let's have a lot of words. Fast, mister, before I break some bones for you."

He squawked and sputtered and tried to jerk away, so I latched onto him with the other hand and started to haul him over the desk, where I could get at him good. I only started to, though, because I heard somebody behind me. I twisted my head around just in time to see the pretty boy from Pete's, the guy who'd left the ladies' room by the window. Just in time to see him, and the leather-wrapped sap in his hand, swinging down at me. Then another bomb, a larger one this time, went off in my head, and I could feel myself falling, for miles and miles, through deepening blackness.

I came to in front of my desk, and I stayed there for a couple of minutes, got up, made it to the desk chair, and sat down in it. If I had thought my head hurt before, it was nothing to the way it felt now. It took me about ten seconds to go from angry to mad to furious to raging. Then I grabbed the phone and got Hazel.

"Where'd those two guys go?"

"What guys?"

"You see anybody leave my office?"

"No, Shell. What's the matter?"

"Plenty." I glanced at my watch. Nine twenty. Just twenty minutes since I'd first opened the office door this morning and answered the ringing phone. I couldn't have been sprawled on the floor more than a minute or two, but even so my two pals would be far away by now. Well, Harrison was going to have a long wait, because I was taking no cases but my own for a while. What with people shooting at me, impersonating me, and batting me on the head, this was a mess I had to find out about fast.

"Hazel," I said, "get me the Hollywood Roosevelt."

While I waited I calmed down a little, and though the throbbing in my head made it difficult, my thoughts got a little clearer. It seemed a big white-haired ape was passing himself off as me, but I didn't have the faintest idea why. He must have been down below on Broadway somewhere, waited till he saw me leave, then come up. What I couldn't figure was how the hell he'd known I'd be leaving my office. He certainly couldn't have intended hanging around all day just in case I left, and he couldn't have known I'd be at Pete's . . .

I stopped as a thought hit me. "Hazel," I said, "forget that call." I hung up, thinking. Whitey couldn't have known I'd show up with a hangover, but he might have known I'd be out of here soon after I arrived. All it takes to get a private detective out of his office is—a phone call. An urgent appointment to meet somebody somewhere, say. Maybe somebody like Frank Harrison. Could be I was reaching for that one, but I didn't think so. I'd had only the one call this morning, an

urgent call that would get me out of the office—and from the very guy who'd pulled the same deal last Monday. And all I'd done Monday was waste an hour. The more I thought about it the more positive I became.

Harrison might still be waiting in the Cinegrill—and he might not. If Harrison was in whatever this caper was with Whitey and Pretty Boy, they'd almost surely phone him soon to let him know I hadn't followed the script; perhaps were even phoning him right now. He'd know, too, that unless I was pretty stupid, I'd sooner or later figure out his part in this.

Excitement started building in me as I grabbed my gun and holster and strapped them on; I was getting an inkling of what might be wrong with that black-haired lovely. Maybe I'd lost Whitey and Pretty Boy, but with luck I could still get my hands on Harrison. Around his throat, say. I charged out of the office. My head hurt all the way, but I made it to the lot where I park my convertible Cadillac, leaped in, and roared out onto Broadway. From L.A. to downtown Hollywood I broke hell out of the speed limit, and at the hotel I found a parking spot at the side entrance, hurried through the big lobby and into the Cinegrill.

I remembered Harrison was a very tall diplomat-type, with hair graying at the temples and bushy eyebrows over dark eyes. Nobody even remotely like him was in the bar. I asked the bartender, "You know a Frank Harrison?"

"Yes, sir."

"He been in here?"

"Yes, sir. He left just a few minutes ago."

"Left the hotel?"

"No, he went into the lobby."

"Thanks." I hustled back into the lobby and up to the desk. A tall, thin clerk in his middle thirties, wearing rimless glasses, looked at me when I stopped.

"I've got an appointment with Mr. Frank Harrison," I said. "What room is he in?"

"Seven-fourteen, sir." The clerk looked a little bewildered. "But Mr. Harrison just left."

"Where'd he go? How long ago?"

The clerk shook his head. "He was checking out. I got his card, and when I turned around I saw him going out the door. Just now. It hasn't been a minute. I don't—"

I turned around and ran for the door, swearing under my breath. The bastard would have been at the desk when I'd come in through the side entrance and headed for the Cinegrill. He must have seen me, and that had been all; he'd powdered. He was well powdered, too, because there wasn't a trace of him when I got out onto Hollywood Boulevard.

Inside the hotel again, I checked some more with the bartender and desk clerk, plus two bellboys and a dining-room waitress. After a lot of questions I knew Harrison had often been seen in the bar and dining room with two other men. One was stocky, with curly black hair, white skin, cleft chin, quite handsome—Pretty Boy; the other was bigger and huskier and almost always wore a hat. A bellhop said he looked a bit like me. I told him it *was* me, and left him looking bewildered. Two bellboys and the bartender also told me that Harrison was seen every day, almost *all* of every day, with a blonde woman a few years under thirty whom they all described as "stacked." The three men and the blonde were often a foursome. From the bartender I learned that Harrison had got a phone call in the Cinegrill about five minutes before I showed up. That would have been from the other two guys on my list, and fit with Harrison's checking out fast—or starting to. I went back to the desk and chatted some more with the thin clerk after showing him the photostat of my license. Pretty Boy—Bob Foster—was in Room 624; Whitey—James Flagg—was in 410; Frank Harrison was in 714.

I asked the clerk, "Harrison married to a blonde?"

"I don't believe he is married, sir."

"He's registered alone?" He nodded, and I said, "I understand he's here a lot with a young woman. Right?"

"Yes, sir. That's Miss Willis."

"A blonde?"

"Yes. Quite, ah, curvaceous."

"What room is she in?"

He had to check. He came back with the card in his hand and said, "Isn't this odd? I had never noticed. She's in seven-sixteen."

It wasn't at all odd. I looked behind him to the slots where room keys were kept. There wasn't any key in the slot for 714. Nor was there any key in the 716 slot. I thanked the clerk, took an elevator to the seventh floor, and walked to Harrison's room. There were two things I wanted to do. One was look around inside here to see if maybe my ex-client had left something behind that might help me find him, and the other was to talk with the blonde. As it turned out I killed two birds with one stone.

The door to 714 was locked, and if I had to I was going to bribe a bellboy to let me in. But first I knocked.

It took quite a while, and I had almost decided I'd have to bribe the bellhop, but then there was the sound of movement inside, a muffled voice called something I couldn't understand, and I heard the soft thud of feet coming toward the door. A key clicked in the lock, and the door swung open. A girl stood there, yawning, her eyes nearly closed, her head drooping, as she stared at approximately the top button of my coat.

She was stark naked. Stark. I had seldom seen *anything* so stark. She had obviously just gotten out of bed, and just as obviously had been sound asleep. She still wasn't awake, because blinking at my chest, she mumbled, "Oh, for Christ's sake, John."

Then she turned around and walked back into the room. I followed her, as if hypnotized, automatically swinging the door shut behind me. She was about five-six and close to 130 pounds, and she was shaped like what I sometimes muse about after the third highball. Everybody who had described the blonde, and she was a blonde, had been correct: she was not only "stacked" but "ah, curvaceous." There was no mistaking it, either; the one time a man can be positive that a woman's shape is her own is when she is wearing nothing but her shape, and this gal was really in *dandy* shape. She walked away from me toward a bedroom next to this room, like a gal moving in her sleep.

She walked to the bed and flopped onto it, pulling a sheet up over her, and I followed her clear to the bed, still coming out of shock, my mind not yet working quite like a well-oiled machine. I managed to figure out that my Frank Harrison was actually named John something. Then she yawned, blinked up at me, and said, "Well, for Christ's sake, John, stop staring."

And then she stopped suddenly, with her mouth stretching wider and wider and her eyes growing enormous as she stared at me. Then she screamed. Man, she screamed like a gal who had just crawled into bed with seventeen tarantulas. I was certainly affecting people in peculiar fashion this morning. She threw off the sheet, leaped to the floor, and lit out for an open door in the far wall, leading into the bathroom, and by now that didn't surprise me a bit.

She didn't make it, though. She was only a yard from me at the start, and I took one step toward her, grabbed her wrist, and hung on. She stopped screaming and slashed long red fingernails at my face, but I grabbed her hand and shoved her back onto the bed, then said, "Relax, sister. Stop clawing at me and keep your yap closed and I'll let go of you."

She was tense, jerking her arms and trying to get free, but suddenly she relaxed. Her face didn't relax, though; she still glared at me, a mixture of hate, anger, and maybe fright, staining her face. She didn't have make-up on, but her face had a hard, tough-kid attractiveness.

I let go of her, and she grabbed the sheet, pulled it up in front of her body. "Get the hell out of here," she said nastily. There was a phone on a bedside stand, and her eyes fell on it. She grabbed it, pulled it off the hook. "I'm calling the cops."

I pulled a chair over beside the bed and sat down. Finally she let go of the phone and glared some more at me.

"I didn't think you'd call any cops, sweetheart," I said. "Maybe I will, but you won't. Quite a shock seeing me here, isn't it? I was supposed to meet Frank—I mean, John—in the Cinegrill, not up here. You're in trouble, baby."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Not much. You know who I am—"

"You're crazy."

"Shut up, Miss Willis. I got a call from your boyfriend at nine sharp this morning. I was supposed to rush out here for an important job; only there isn't any important job. Your John, the guy I know as Frank Harrison, just wanted me out of my office for an hour or so. Right?"

She didn't say anything.

"So another guy could play Shell Scott for a while. Now you tell me why."

Her lips curled, and she swore at me.

I said, "Something you don't know. You must have guessed the caper's gone sour, but you probably don't know John has powdered. Left you flat, honey."

She frowned momentarily, then her face smoothed and got blank. It stayed blank for several minutes, and there were a lot of questions she could have answered. She was clammed good. Finally I said, "Look, I know enough of it already. There's John, and Bob Foster, and a big white-haired slob named Flagg who probably got his peroxide from you. And don't play innocent, because I know you're thick with all of them, especially John. Hell, this is his room. So get smart and—"

The phone rang. She reached for it, then stopped.

I yanked the .38 out from under my coat and said, "Don't get wise; say hello." I took the phone off the hook and held it for her. She said, "Hello," and I put the phone to my ear just in time to hear a man's voice say, "John, baby. I had to blow fast, that bastard was in the hotel. Pack and meet me at Apex." He stopped.

I covered the mouthpiece and told the blonde, "Tell him okay. Just that, nothing else."

I stuck the phone up in front of her, and she said, "The panic's on. Fade out." I got the phone back to my ear just in time to hear the click as he hung up.

The blonde was smiling at me. But she stopped smiling when I stuck my gun back in its holster, then jiggled the

receiver, and said, "Get me the Hollywood Detective Division."

"Hey, wait a minute," the blonde said. "What you calling the cops for?"

"You can't be that stupid. Tehachapi for you, sweetheart. You probably have a lot of friends there. It won't be so bad. Just horrible."

She licked her lips. When the phone was answered I said, "Put Lieutenant Bronson on, will you?"

The gal said, "Wait a minute. Hold off on that call. Let's . . . talk about it."

I grinned. "Now you want to talk. No soap. You can talk to the cops. And don't tell me there isn't enough to hold you on."

"Please. I . . . call him later if you have to." She let go of the sheet, and it fell to her waist. I told myself to be strong and look away, but I was weak.

"You got it all wrong," she said softly. "Let's . . . talk." She tried to smile, but it didn't quite come off. I shook my head.

She threw the sheet all the way back on the bed then, stood up, holding her body erect, and stepped close to me. "Please, honey. We can have fun. Don't you like me, honey?"

"What's with that white-haired ape in my office? And what's Apex?"

"I don't know. I told you before. Honest. Honey, look at me."

That was a pretty silly thing to say, because I sure wasn't looking at the wallpaper. Just then Lieutenant Bronson came on, and I said, "Shell Scott here, Bron. Hollywood Roosevelt, Room Seven-fourteen."

The blonde stepped closer, almost touching me, then picked up my free right hand and passed it around her waist. "Hang up," she said. "You won't be sorry." Her voice dropped lower, became a husky murmur as she pressed my fingers into the warm flesh. "Forget it, honey. I can be awfully nice."

Bronson was asking me what was up. I said, "Just a second, Bron," then to the girl, "Sounds like a great kick. Just tell me the story, spill your guts—"

She threw my hand away from her, her face getting almost ugly, and then she took a wild swing at me. I blocked the blow with my right hand, put my hand flat on her chest, and shoved her back against the bed. She sprawled on it, saying some very nasty things.

I said into the phone, "I've got a brassy blonde here for you."

"What's the score?"

"Frankly, I'm not sure. But I'll sign a complaint. Using foul language, maybe."

"That her? I can hear her."

"Or maybe attempted rape." I grinned at the blonde as she yanked the sheet over her and used some more foul language. I said to Bronson, "Actually, it looks like some kind of confidence game—with me as sucker. I don't know the gal, but you guys might make her. Probably she's got a record." I saw the girl's face change as she winced. "Yeah," I added, "she's got a record. Probably as long as her face is right now."

"I'll send a man up."

"Make it fast, will you? I've got to get out of here, and this beautiful blonde hasn't a stitch of clothes on."

"Huh? She— I'll be right there."

It didn't take him long. By ten forty-five Bronson, who had arrived grinning—and the three husky sergeants who came with him—had taken the blonde away, and I was back in the hotel's lobby. I had given Bronson a rundown on the morning's events, and he'd said they'd keep after the blonde. Neither of us expected any chatter from her, though. After that soft, "I can be awfully nice," she hadn't said anything except swear words and, "I want a lawyer, I know my rights, I want a lawyer." She'd get a lawyer. Tomorrow, maybe.

I went into the Cinegrill and had a bourbon and water while I tried to figure my next move. Bron and I had checked the phone book and city directory for an "Apex" and found almost fifty of them, from Apex Diaper Service to an Apex Junk Yard, which was no help at all, though the cops would check. That lead was undoubtedly no good now that the blonde had warned Harrison. I was getting more and more

anxious to find out what the score was, because this was sure shaping up like some kind of con, and I wasn't a bit happy about it.

The confidence man is, in many ways, the élite of the criminal world. Usually intelligent, personable, and more persuasive than Svengali, con-men would be the nicest guys in the world except for one thing: they have no conscience at all. I've run up against con-men before, and they're tricky and treacherous. One of my first clients was an Englishman who had been taken on the rag, a stock swindle, for $140,000. He'd tried to find the man, with no luck, then came to me; I didn't have any luck, either. But when he'd finally given up hope of ever seeing his money again, he'd said to me, of the grifter who had taken him, "I shall always remember him as an extrahdn'rly chahming chap. He was a pleasant bahstahd." Then he'd paused, thought a bit, and added, "But by God, he *was* a bahstahd!"

The Englishman was right. Confidence men are psychologists with diplomas from sad people: the suckers, the marks, that the con-boys have taken; and there's not a con-man worthy of the name who wouldn't take a starving widow's last penny or a bishop's last C-note, with never a twinge of remorse. They are the pleasant bastards, the con-men, and they thrive because they can make other men believe that opportunity is not only knocking but chopping the door down—and because of men's desire for a fast, even if dishonest, buck, or else the normal greed that's in most of us. They are the spellbinders, and ordinarily don't resort to violence or go around shooting holes in people.

And it looked as if three of them, or at least two, were up against me. The other one, Pretty Boy Foster, was a bit violent, I remembered, and swung a mean sap. My head still throbbed. All three men, now that the blonde had told Harrison there was big trouble, would probably be making themselves scarce.

But there was still the girl. The gorgeous little gal with black hair and light-blue eyes and the chrome-plated pistol. I thought back over what she'd said to me. There'd been a lot

of gibberish about $24,000 and my being a crook and . . . something else. Something about Folsom's Market. It was worth a check. I looked the place up in the phone book, found it listed on Van Ness Avenue, finished my drink, and headed for Folsom's Market.

It was on Van Ness near Washington. I parked, went inside, and looked around. Just an ordinary small store; the usual groceries and a glass-faced meat counter extending the length of the left wall. The place was doing a good business. I walked to the single counter, where a young, red-haired girl about twenty was ringing up a customer's sales on the cash register, and when she'd finished I told her I wanted to speak with the manager. She smiled, then leaned forward to a small mike and said, "Mr. Gordon. Mr. Gordon, please."

In a few seconds a short man in a business suit, with a fleshy, pink face and a slight potbelly, walked up to me. I told him my name and business, showed him my credentials, then said, "Actually, Mr. Gordon, I don't know if you can help me or not. This morning I talked briefly with a young lady who seemed quite angry with me. She thought I was some kind of crook and mentioned this place, Folsom's Market. Perhaps you know her." I described the little doll, and she was easy enough to describe, particularly with the odd gray streak in her dark hair. That gal was burned into my memory, and I remembered every lovely thing about her, but when I finished the manager shook his head.

"Don't remember anything like her around here," he said.

"She mentioned something about her father, and twenty-four thousand dollars. I don't—"

I stopped, because Mr. Gordon suddenly started chuckling. The cashier said, "Oh, it must be that poor old man."

The manager laughed. "This'll kill you," he said. "Some old foreigner about sixty years old came in here this morning, right at eight when we opened up. Said he just wanted to look his store over. *His* store, get that, Mr. Scott. Claimed he'd bought the place, and—this'll kill you—for twenty-four thousand dollars. Oh, boy, a hundred grand wouldn't half buy this spot."

He was laughing about every third word. It had been very funny, he thought. Only it wasn't a bit funny to me, and I felt sick already. The way this deal was starting to figure, I didn't blame the little cutey for taking a few shots at me.

I said slowly, "Exactly what happened? What else did this . . . this foreigner do?"

The manager's potbelly shook a little. "Ah, he gawked around for a while, then I talked to the guy. I guess it must of taken me half an hour to convince him Mr. Borrage owns this place—you know Borrage, maybe, owns a dozen independent places like this, real rich fellow—anyway, this stupid old guy swore he'd bought the place. For the money and his little grocery store. You imagine that? Finally I gave him Borrage's address and told him to beat it. Hell, I called Borrage, naturally. He got a chuckle out of it, too, when I told him."

Anger was beginning to flicker in me. "Who was this stupid old man?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Hell, I don't know. I just told him finally to beat it. I couldn't have him hanging around here."

"No," I said. "Of course not. He was a foreigner, huh? You mean he wasn't an Indian?"

Mr. Gordon blinked at me, said, "Hey?" then described the man as well as he could. He told me he'd never seen the guy before, and walked away.

The cashier said softly, "It wasn't like that at all, Mr. Scott. And he left his name with me."

"Swell, honey. Can you give it to me?"

Her face was sober, unsmiling, as she nodded. "I just hate that Mr. Gordon," she said. "The way it was, this little man came in early and just stood around looking pleased and happy, kind of smiling all the time. I noticed he was watching me for a while when I checked out the customers, then he came over to me and smiled. 'You're a fast worker,' he said to me. 'Very good worker, I'm watching you.' Then he told me I was going to be working for him, that he'd bought this place and was going to move in tomorrow." She frowned. "I didn't know any better. For all I knew, he might have

bought the store. I wish he had." She glanced toward the back of the store where Mr. Gordon had gone. "He was a sweet little man."

"What finally happened?"

"Well, he kept standing around, then Mr. Gordon came up here and I asked him if the store had been sold. He went over and talked to the old man a while, started laughing, and talked some more. The old man got all excited and waved his arms around and started shouting. Finally Mr. Gordon got a little sharp—he's like that—and pointed to the door. In a minute the little guy came over to me and wrote his name and address down. He said there was some kind of mistake, but it would be straightened out. Then he left." She paused. "He looked like he was going to cry."

"I see. You got that name handy?"

"Uh-huh." She opened the cash register and took a slip of paper out of it. "He wanted us to be able to get in touch with him; he acted sort of dazed."

"He would have," I said. She handed me the note. On it, in a shaky, laboriously scrawled script, was written an address and: *Emil Elmlund, Elmlund's Neighborhood Grocery. Phone WI 2-1258.*

"Use your phone?" I asked.

"Sure."

I dialed WI 2-1258. The phone rang several times, then a girl's voice answered, "Hello."

"Hello. Who is this, please?"

"This is Janet Elmlund."

That was what Pretty Boy had called the girl in Pete's, Janet and Jan. I said, "Is Mrs. McCurdy there?"

"McCurdy? I—you must have the wrong number."

I told her I wanted WI 2-1259, apologized, and hung up. I didn't want her to know I was coming out there. This time she might have a rifle. Then I thanked the cashier, went out to the Cad, and headed for Elmlund's Neighborhood Grocery.

It was a small store on a tree-lined street, the kind of neighborhood grocery you used to see a lot of in the days before Supermarkets sprang up on every other corner. A sign

on the door said, *Closed Today*. A path had been worn in the grass alongside the store's right wall, leading to a small house in the rear. I walked along the path and paused momentarily before the house. It was white, neat, with green trim around the windows, a porch along its front. A man sat on the porch in a wooden chair, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. He was looking right at me as I walked toward him, but he didn't give any sign that he'd noticed me, and his face didn't change expression.

I walked up onto the porch. "Mr. Elmlund?"

He slowly raised his head and looked at me. He was a small man, with a lined brown face and very light blue eyes. Wisps of gray hair still clung to his head. He looked at me and blinked, then said, "Yes."

He looked away from me then, out into the yard again. It was as if I weren't there at all. And actually, my presence probably didn't mean a thing to him. It was obvious that he had been taken in a confidence game, taken for $24,000 and maybe a dream. I couldn't know all of it yet, but I knew enough about how he must feel now, still shocked, dazed, probably not yet thinking at all.

I squatted beside him and said, "Mr. Elmlund, my name is Shell Scott."

For a minute nothing happened, then his eyebrows twitched, pulled down. Frowning, he looked at me. "What?" he said.

I heard the click of high heels, the front door was pushed open, and a girl stood there, holding a tray before her with two sandwiches on it. It was the same little lovely, black hair pulled back now and tied with a blue ribbon. She still wore the blue clamdiggers and the man's shirt.

I stood up fast. "Hold everything," I said to her. "Get this through your head—there's a guy in town about my size, with hair the same color as mine, and he's pretending to be me. He's taken my name, and he's used my office. But I never heard of you, or Mr. Elmlund, or Folsom's Market until this morning. Now don't throw any sandwiches at me, and for God's sake don't start shooting."

She had been staring at me openmouthed ever since she opened the door and spotted me. Finally her mouth came shut with a click and her hands dropped. The tray fell clattering to the porch, and the sandwiches rolled almost to my feet. She stared at me for another half minute without speaking, comprehension growing on her face, then she said, "Oh, no. Oh, my God. Oh, no."

"Oh, yes," I said. "Now suppose we all sit down and get to the bottom of this mess."

She said, "Really? Please . . . you wouldn't—"

"I wouldn't." I showed her several different kinds of identification from my wallet, license, picture, even a fingerprint, and when I finished she was convinced. She blinked those startlingly blue eyes at me and said, "How awful. I'm so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Yes. Yes, indeed. Right now, I forgive you."

"You don't. You can't." For the first time since I'd seen her, she wasn't looking furious or shocked, and for the moment at least she seemed even to have forgotten about the money they'd lost. I had, I suppose, spoken with almost frantic eagerness, and now she lowered her head slightly and blinked dark lashes once, and her red lips curved ever so slightly in a soft smile. At that moment I could have forgiven her if she'd been cutting my throat with a hack saw. She said again, "You can't."

"Oh, yes I can. Forget it. Could have happened to anybody."

She laughed softly, then her face sobered as she apparently remembered why I was here. I remembered, too, and started asking questions. Ten minutes later we were all sitting on the porch eating picnic sandwiches and drinking beer, and I had most of the story. Mr. Elmlund—a widower, and Janet's father—had run the store here for more than ten years, paid for it, saved $24,000. He was looking for a larger place and had been talking about this to a customer one day, a well-dressed man, smooth-talking, very tall, graying at the temples. The guy's name was William Klein, but he was also apparently my own Frank Harrison. It seemed Harrison was a real-estate

broker and had casually mentioned that he'd let Mr. Elmlund know if he ran across anything that looked good.

Mr. Elmlund sipped his beer and kept talking. Elmlund said to me, "He seemed like a very nice man, friendly. Then when he come in and told me about this place it sounded good. He said this woman was selling the store because her husband had died not long ago. She was selling the store and everything and going back East, wasn't really much interested in making a lot of money out of it. She was rich, had a million dollars or more. She just wanted to get away fast, he said, and would sell for sixty thousand cash. Well, I told him that was too much, but he asked me to look at it—that was Folsom's Market—maybe we could work a deal, he said. So the next Sunday we went there; I didn't think it would hurt none to look."

"Sunday? Was the store open?"

"No, it was closed, but he had a key. That seemed right because he was—he said he was agent for it. Well, it was just like I'd always wanted, a nice store. Nice market there, and plenty room, good location. . . ." He let the words trail off.

The rest of it was more of the same. The old con play; give the mark a glimpse of something he wants bad, then make him think he can have it for little or nothing, tighten the screws. A good con-man can tie up a mark so tight that normal reasoning powers go out the window. And getting a key that would open the store wouldn't have been any more trouble than getting the one that opened my office.

Last Sunday, a week after they'd looked over the store, Harrison had come to Elmlund all excited, saying the widow was anxious to sell and was going to advertise the store for sale in the local papers. If Elmlund wanted the place at a bargain price, he'd have to act fast. Thursday—today, now—the ads would appear and the news would be all over town; right then only the widow, Harrison, and Elmlund himself knew about it. So went Harrison's story. After some more talk Harrison had asked how much cash Elmlund could scrape together. When Harrison learned $24,000 was tops, why naturally that was just enough cash—plus the deed to Elm-

lund's old store—to maybe swing a fast deal. All con-men are actors, expert at making their lines up as they go along, and Harrison must have made up the bit about throwing the deed in merely to make Elmlund think he was paying a more legitimate price; no well-played mark would think of wondering why a widow getting rid of one store so she could blow would take another as part payment.

Janet broke in, looking at me. "That was when Dad thought about having the transaction investigated. He talked to me about it and decided to see you, have you look into it. You see, he thought the sale was still secret, and you could check on it before the ads came out in the papers. And . . . he just couldn't believe it. He intended originally to invest only about ten thousand above what we'd get out of our store, but, well, it seemed like such a wonderful chance for him, for us. We were both a little suspicious, though."

"Uh-huh." I could see why Elmlund might want the deal checked, and I could even understand why he'd decided to see me instead of somebody else. The last six months I'd been mixed up in a couple cases that got splashed all over the newspapers, and my name was familiar to most of Los Angeles. But another bit puzzled me.

I said, "Janet, this morning in Pete's"—she made a face—"who was the man who charged in and yelled at you? Just as you were . . . leaving."

"Man? I didn't see any man. I . . . lost my head." She smiled slightly. "I guess you know. And after . . . afterward, I got scared and ran, just wanted to get away. I thought maybe I'd killed somebody."

"I thought maybe you had myself."

She said, "I was almost crazy. Dad had just told me what had happened, and I was furious. And you'd told Dad everything was fine, that the transaction was on the level—I mean *he* had, that other Shell Scott . . . you know."

"Yeah. What about that?" I turned to Mr. Elmlund. "When did you see this egg in my office?" I already knew, but I wanted to be sure.

"At nine thirty on Monday morning, this last Monday. I

went in right at nine thirty, there in the Hamilton Building, and talked to him. He said he'd investigate it for me. Then yesterday morning he came out to the store here and said it was all right. It cost me fifty dollars."

"Sure. That made the con more realistic. You'd have thought it was funny if you weren't soaked a little for the job."

He shrugged and said, "Then, right after I talked yesterday to the detective—that one—he drove me and Janet from here to the real-estate office, the Angelus Realty. Said he was going by there. Well, I stopped at the bank—those ads were supposed to come out in the papers today, you know—and got the money. Then at that office I gave them the money and signed all the papers and things and . . . that was all. I wasn't supposed to go to the store till tomorrow, but I couldn't wait."

Janet told me where the "real-estate office" was, on Twelfth Street, but I knew that info was no help now. She said that this morning, before she'd come charging in at me, she'd first gone to the Angelus Realtors—probably planning to shoot holes in Harrison, though she didn't say so. But the place had been locked, and she'd then come to the Hamilton Building. She remembered the sign ANGELUS REALTORS had still been painted on the door, but I knew, sign or no sign, that office would be empty.

I looked at Janet. "This guy I was talking about, the one in Pete's Bar this A.M., was about five-ten, stocky, I suppose you'd say he was damned good-looking. Black hair, even features."

"That sounds like Bob Foster. Cleft chin and brown eyes?"

"That's him. Did you meet him before or after this deal came up?"

"Bob? Why, you can't think he—"

"I can and do. I'm just wondering which way it was; did he set up the con, or did he come in afterward?"

"Why, I met Bob a month before the realtor showed up. Bob and I went out several times."

"Then, dear Bob told him to come around, I imagine. I

suppose Bob knew your father was thinking about a new store."

"Yes, but—"

"And after you and your father talked about hiring me to make sure the deal was square, did Bob happen to learn about it?"

"Why . . . he was here when we discussed it. He—" She stopped, eyes widening. "I'd forgotten it until now, but *Bob* suggested that Dad engage an investigator. When we told him we couldn't believe it, that there just had to be something wrong or dishonest about the sale for the price to be so low, *he* suggested we hire a detective to investigate the man and all the rest of it." She paused again. "He even suggested your name, asked us if we'd heard of you or met you. We hadn't met you, but of course we'd read about you in the papers, and told Bob so. He said he knew you, that you were capable and thoroughly honest—and he . . . made the appointment with you for nine thirty Monday."

"Good old Bob," I said. "That made it perfect. That would get rid of the last of your doubts. Janet, Bob Foster is probably no more his right name than Harrison is a real-estate dealer. The guy I know as Harrison, you know as Klein; his girlfriend calls him John, and his real name is probably Willie Zilch. And I'm not getting these answers by voodoo. Harrison, Foster, and the guy who said he was Shell Scott all stay at the same hotel. They're a team, with so many fake names they sound like a community."

"But Bob—I thought he was interested in me. He was always nice."

"Yeah, pleasant. So you saw him a few times, and then he learned your dad was ripe for a swindle. He tipped Harrison, the inside-man, and they set up the play. The detective angle just tied it tighter. It was easy enough. A phone call to me to get me out of the office, another guy bleaches his hair, walks in and waits for your dad to show, then kills a couple days and reports all's well."

It was quiet for a minute, then I said, "The thing I don't

get is how he happened to show up at Pete's right after you did?"

Mr. Elmlund answered that one. "He and Jan were going on a picnic today. When I told her about—about losing my money she ran to the car and drove away. Right after, Bob come in and asked for Janet. I told him what happened. Said she mentioned going to see that Klein and you. Now I think of it, he got a funny look and run off to his car."

"I hate to say it, Janet," I said, "but Bob was probably less interested in the picnic—under the circumstances—than in finding out if everything was still under control."

I thought a minute. The white-haired egg had probably been planted outside waiting for me to leave; when I did, he went up to the office. Bob must have showed up and checked with Hazel, reached Pete's just as Janet started spraying bullets around, chased her but couldn't find her or else knew he'd better tip Whitey fast. So he'd charged to the office just in time to sap me. Something jarred my thoughts there. It bothered me, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

I said, "Have you been to the police yet?"

Janet said, "No. We've been so . . . upset. We haven't done anything since I got back home."

"I'll take care of it, then." I got up. "That's about it, I guess. I'll try running the men down, but it's not likely they'll be easily found. I'll do what I can."

Janet had been sitting quietly, looking at me. Now she got up, took my hand, and pulled me after her into the front room of the house. Inside, she put a hand on my arm and said softly, "You know how sorry I am about this morning. I was a little crazy for a while there. But I want to thank you for coming out, saying you'll help."

"I'll be helping myself, too, Janet."

"I get sick when I think I might actually have shot you." She looked at the raw spot on my chin. "Did I . . . shoot you there?"

I grinned at her. "It might have been a piece of glass. I landed in some."

"Just a minute." She went away and came back with a bit

of gauze and a piece of tape. She pressed it gently against the "wound," as she called it, her fingers cool and soft against my cheek. Her touch sent a tingle over my skin, a slight shiver between my shoulder blades. Then she stretched up and gently pressed her lips against my cheek.

"That better?"

It's funny; some women can leap into your lap, practically strangle you, mash their mouth all over you, kiss you with their lips and tongues and bodies, and leave you cold—I'm talking about *you,* of course. But just the gentle touch of this gal's lips on my cheek turned my spine to spaghetti. That was the fastest fever I ever got; a thermometer in my mouth would have popped open and spouted mercury every which way.

I said, "Get your twenty-two. I'm about to shoot myself full of holes."

She laughed softly, her arms going around my neck, then she started to pull herself up but my head was already on its way down, and when her lips met mine it was a new kind of shock. The blonde back there in the hotel room had been fairly enjoyable, but Janet had more sex and fire and hunger in just her lips than the blonde had in her entire stark body. When Jan's hands slid from my neck and she stepped back I automatically moved toward her, but she put a hand on my chest, smiling, glanced toward the porch, then took my arm and led me outside again.

When my breathing was reasonably normal I said, "Mr. Elmlund, I'm leaving now but if I get any news at all, I'll hurry back—I mean, ha, come back."

Janet chuckled. "Hurry's all right," she said.

Mr. Elmlund said, "Mr. Scott, if you can get our money again I'll pay you anything—half of it—"

"Forget that part. I don't want any money. If I should miraculously get it back, it's all yours."

He looked puzzled. "Why? Why should you help me?"

I said, "Actually, Mr. Elmlund, this is just as important to me. I don't like guys using my name to swindle people; I could get a very nasty reputation that way. Not to mention

my dislike for being conned myself and getting hit over the head. For all I know there are guys named Shell Scott all over town conning people, maybe shooting people. The con worked so well for these guys once, they'll probably try the same angles again—or would have if I hadn't walked in . . . on . . ." I stopped. That same idea jarred my thoughts as it had before when I'd been thinking about the guy in my office. It was so simple I should have had it long ago. But now a chill ran down my spine, and I leaned toward Mr. Elmlund.

"You weren't supposed to see me—the detective—this morning, were you?"

"Why, no. Everything was finished, he already give me his report."

I didn't hear the rest of what he said. I was wondering why the hell Harrison had called me again, why Whitey had needed my office again, if not for Mr. Elmlund.

I swung toward Janet. "Where's your phone? Quick."

She blinked at me, then turned and went into the house. I followed, right on her heels.

"Show me. Hurry."

She pointed out the phone on a table and I grabbed it, dialed the Hamilton Building. There was just a chance—but it was already after noon.

Hazel came on. "This is Shell. Anyone looking for me?"

"Hi, Shell. How's your hangover—"

"This is important, hell with the hangover. Anybody there right after I took off?"

Her voice got brisk. "One man, about fifty, named Carl Strossmin. Said he had an appointment for nine thirty."

"He say what about?"

"No. I took his name and address. Thirty-six-Twenty-two Gramercy. Said he'd phone back; he hasn't called."

"Anything else?"

"That's all."

"Thanks." I hung up. I said aloud, "I'll be goddamned. They've got another mark."

Jan said, "What?" but I was running for the door. I leaped into the Cad, gunned the motor, and swung around in a

U-turn. It was clear enough. Somewhere the boys had landed another sucker, and the "investigation" by Shell Scott had worked so well once that they must have used the gimmick again. They would still be around, but if they made this score they'd almost surely be off for Chicago, or Buenos Aires, or God knew where.

Carl Strossmin—I remembered hearing about him. He'd made a lot of money, most of it in deals barely this side of the law; he'd be the perfect mark because he was always looking for the best of it. Where Elmlund had thought he was merely getting an amazing piece of good fortune, Strossmin might well think he was throwing the blocks to somebody else. I didn't much like what I'd heard about Strossmin, but I liked not at all what I knew of Foster and Whitey and Harrison.

When I spotted the number I wanted on Gramercy I slammed on the brakes, jumped out, and ran up to the front door of 3622. I rang the bell and banged on the door until a middle-aged woman looked out at me, frowning.

"Say," she said. "What is the matter with you?"

"Mrs. Strossmin?"

"Yes."

"Your husband here?"

Her eyes narrowed. "No. Why? What do you want him for?"

I groaned. "He isn't closing any business deal, is he?"

Her eyes were slits now. "What are you interested for?" She looked me up and down. "They told us there were other people interested. You—"

"Lady, listen. He isn't buying a store, or an old locomotive or anything, is he?"

She pressed her lips together. "I don't think I'd better say anything till he gets back."

"That's fine," I said. "That's great. Because the nice businessmen are crooks. They're confidence men, thieves, they're wanted by police of seventy counties. Kiss your cabbage good-by, lady—or else start telling me about it fast."

Her lips weren't pressed together any more. They peeled

apart like a couple of liver chunks. "Crooks?" she groaned. "*Crooks?*"

"Crooks, gyps, robbers, murderers. Lady, they're dishonest."

She let out a wavering scream and threw her hands up in the air. "Crooks!" she wailed. "I told him they were crooks. Oh, I told the old fool, you can bet—!" She fainted.

I swore nastily, jerked the screen door open and picked her up, then carried her to a couch. Finally she came out of it and blinked at me. She opened her mouth.

I said, "If you say 'crooks' once again I'll bat you. Now where the hell did your husband go?"

She started babbling, not one word understandable. But finally she got to her feet and started tottering around. "I wrote it down," she said. "I wrote it down. I wrote—"

"What did you write down?"

"Where he was going. The address." She threw up her hands. "Forty-one thousand dollars! Crooks! Forty-one—"

"Listen," I said. "He have that much money on him?"

"No. He had to go to the bank."

"What bank?" By the time she answered I'd already spotted the phone and was dialing. A bank clerk told me that Carl Strossmin had drawn $41,000 out of his account only half an hour ago. He'd been very excited, but he'd made no mention of what he wanted the money for. I hung up. I knew why Carl hadn't mentioned anything about it: it was a secret.

Mrs. Strossmin was still puttering around, pulling out drawers and occasionally throwing her hands up into the air and screeching. Gradually I got her story, and with what I already knew, put the pieces together. Her husband's appointment with "Shell Scott" had been made two days ago by real-estate dealer "Harrison" himself, here in Strossmin's home. After suggesting that, since Strossmin seemed a bit undecided, he might feel safer if he engaged a "completely honest" detective, Harrison had dialed a number, chatted a bit, and handed Strossmin the phone. Finally an appointment had been made for nine thirty this A.M. Strossmin had been talking, of course, to Whitey, who most likely was in a phone booth or bar.

Harrison probably wouldn't have suggested me *by name* to Strossmin, expecting the mark to accept his, the realtor's, suggestion, except for one thing, which was itself important to the con: my reputation in L.A. A lot of people here believe I'm crazy, others think I'm stupid, and many, particularly old maids, are sure I'm a fiendish lecher; but there's never been any question about my being honest. This phase of the con was based on making Strossmin—and Elmlund before him—think he was really talking to me when he met Whitey, the Shell Scott of the con, in my office. However, when I popped back into the office and messed up that play this morning, the boys had to change their plans fast.

At eleven thirty, about the time I was driving to Elmlund's, Whitey had come here to Strossmin's home, apologized for not being in his office when Strossmin had arrived this A.M., and said he'd come here to spare Strossmin another trip downtown. After learning what Strossmin wanted investigated, Whitey had pretended surprise and declared solemnly that this was a strange coincidence indeed, because Strossmin was the second man to ask for the identical investigation. Oh, yes, he'd already investigated—for this other eager buyer—and told him that the deal was on the level. No doubt about it, this was the opportunity of the century—and time, sad to say, was terribly short. Apparently, said Whitey, negotiations were going on with dozens of other people—and so on until Strossmin had been in a frenzy of impatience.

Finally Mrs. Strossmin found her slip of paper and thrust it at me. An address was scribbled on it: Apex Realtors, 4870 Normandie Avenue. I grabbed the paper and ran to the Cad.

Apex Realtors was, logically enough, no more than an ordinary house with a sign in the window: Apex Realtors. When I reached it and parked, a small, well-dressed man with a thick mustache was just climbing into a new Buick at the curb. I ran from the Cad to his Buick and stopped him just as he started the engine.

"Mr. Strossmin?"

He was just like his wife. His eyes narrowed. "Yes."

I took a deep breath and blurted it out. "Did you just buy Folsom's Market?"

He grinned. "Beat you, didn't I? You're too late—"

"Shut up. You bought nothing but a headache. How many men inside there?"

He chuckled. "They told me I'd have to hurry. Sorry, my good man, but—"

About ready to flip, I yanked out my gun and pointed it at him. *"How many men in there?"*

I thought for a minute he was going to faint, too, but he managed to gasp, "Three."

I said, "You wait here," then turned and ran up to the house. The door was partly ajar, and I hit it and charged inside, the gun in my right hand. There wasn't anybody in sight, but another door straight ahead of me had a sign, OFFICE, on it. As I went through the door a car motor growled into life behind the house. I ran for the back, found a door standing wide open, and jumped through it just as a sky-blue Oldsmobile sedan parked in the alley took off fast. I barely got a glimpse of it, but I knew who was in it. The three con-men were powdering now that they had all the dough they were after. There was a chance they'd seen me, but it wasn't likely. Probably they'd grabbed the dough and left by the back way as soon as Strossmin stepped through the front door.

I raced out front again and sprinted for the Cad, yelling to Strossmin, "Call the police!" He sat there, probably feeling pleased at the coup he'd just put over. He'd call the cops, next week, maybe. I ripped the Cad into gear and roared to the corner, took a right and stepped on the gas. I had to slow at the next intersection, looked both directions and caught a flash of blue two blocks away on my right, swung in after them, and pushed the accelerator to the floorboards. I was gaining on them rapidly, and now I had a few seconds to try figuring out how to stop them. Up close I could see the Olds sedan, and the figures of three men inside it, two in the front seat and one in back. Con-men don't usually carry guns, but these guys operated a little differently from most

con-men. In the first place they usually make the mark think he's in on a crooked deal, and in the second they almost always try to cool the mark out, allay his suspicions so he doesn't know, at least for a long time, that he's been taken. The boys ahead of me had broken both those rules, and there was a good chance they'd also broken the rule about guns.

But I was less than half a block behind them now, and they apparently hadn't tumbled. They must figure they were in the clear, so I had surprise on my side. Well, I'd surprise them.

We were a long way from downtown here, but still in the residential section. I caught up with their car, pulled out on their left and slightly ahead. Then as we reached an intersection I swung to my right, cutting them off just as I heard one of the men in the blue Olds yell loudly.

The driver did the instinctive thing, jerked his steering wheel to the right, and they went clear up over the curb and stalled on a green lawn before a small house. I was out of my Cad and running toward them, the Colt in my fist, before their car stopped moving twenty feet from me. And one of them *did* have a gun.

They sure as hell knew who I was by now, and I heard the gun crack. A slug snapped past me as I dived for the lawn, skidded a yard. Doors swung open on both sides of the blue Olds. Black-haired Pretty Boy jumped from the back and started running away from me, lugging a brief case.

I got to my knees, and yelled, "Stop! Hold it or you get it, Foster."

He swung around, crouching, and light gleamed on the metal of a gun in his hand. He fired once at me and missed, and I didn't hold back any longer. I snapped the first shot from my .38 but I aimed the next two times, and he sagged slowly to his knees, then fell forward on his face.

Gray-haired Harrison was a few steps from the car, standing frozen, staring at Foster's body, but Whitey was fifty feet beyond him running like mad. I took out after him, but as I went by Harrison I let him have the full weight of my .38 on the back of his skull. I didn't even look back; he'd keep for a while.

I jammed my gun into its holster and sprinted down the sidewalk, Whitey half a block ahead but losing ground. He wasn't in very good shape, apparently, and after a single block he was damn near staggering. He heard my feet splatting on the pavement behind him, and for a moment he held his few yards' advantage. Then he slowed again. He must have known I had him, because he stopped and whirled around to face me, ready to go down fighting.

He went down, all right, but not fighting. When he stopped I had been less than ten feet from him, traveling like a fiend, and he spun around just in time to connect his face with my right fist. I must have started the blow from six feet away, just as he began turning, and what with my speed from running and the force of the blow itself, my fist must have been traveling fifty miles an hour.

It was awful what it did to him. I caught only a flashing glimpse of his face as he swung around, lips peeled back and hands coming up, and then my knuckles landed squarely on his mouth and his lips really peeled back, and he started going the same direction I was going and almost as fast. I ran several steps past him before I could stop, but when I turned around he was practically behind me and there was a thin streak of blood for two yards on the sidewalk. He was all crumpled up, out cold, and for a minute I thought he was out for good. But I felt for his heartbeat and found it.

So I squatted by him and waited. Before he came out of it, a little crowd gathered: half a dozen kids and some housewives, one young guy about thirty who came running from half a block away. I told him to call the cops, and he phoned. Whitey was still out when the guy came back and said a car was on its way.

Finally Whitey stirred, moaned. I looked around and said to the women, "Get the kids out of here. And maybe you better not stick around yourselves."

The women frowned, shifted uneasily, but they shooed the kids away. Whitey shook his head. Finally he was able to sit up. His face wasn't pretty at all. I grabbed his coat and pulled him close to me.

I said, "Shell Scott, huh? I hear you're a tough baby. Get up, friend."

I stood up and watched him while he got his feet under him. It took him a while, and all the time he didn't say a word. I suppose the decent thing would have been to let him get all the way up, but I didn't wait. When he was halfway up I balled my left fist and slammed it under his chin. It straightened him just enough so I could set myself solidly and get him good with my right fist. It landed where I wanted it to, on his nose, and he left us for a while longer. He fell onto the grass on his back, and perhaps he had looked a bit like me at one time, but he didn't any more.

The guy who had called the cops helped me carry Whitey back to the blue Oldsmobile. We dumped him and Harrison inside, and I climbed in back with them—and with the brief case—while he went out to the curb and waited for a prowl car. I got busy. When I finished, these three boys had very little money in their wallets and none was in the brief case. It added up to $67,500. There was Elmlund's $24,000, I figured, plus Strossmin's $41,000, plus my $2,500. I lit a cigarette and waited for the cops.

It was two P.M. before I got away. Both cops in the patrol car were men I knew well, Borden and Lane. Lane and I especially were good friends. I gave my story and my angles to Lane, and finally he went along with what I wanted.

I finished it with, "This Strossmin is still so wound up by these guys he'll probably figure it out about next week, but when he does, he should be a good witness. No reason why Elmlund can't be left out of it."

Lane shook his head and rubbed a heavy chin where bristles were already sprouting. "Well . . . if this Strossmin doesn't come through in court, we'll need Elmlund."

"You'll get him. Besides, I'll be in court, remember. Enjoying myself."

He nodded. "Okay, Shell."

I handed him the brief case with $41,000 inside it, told him I'd come to Headquarters later, and took off. I'd given

Lane the address where I'd left Strossmin, as well as his home address, but Strossmin hadn't waited. I drove to his house.

I could hear them going at it hammer and tongs. Mrs. Strossmin didn't even stop when I rang the bell, but finally her husband opened the door. He just stood there glowering at me. "Well?" he said.

"I just wanted to let you know, Mr. Strossmin, that the police have caught the men who tricked you."

I was going on, but he said, "Trick me? Nobody tricked me. *You're* trying to trick me."

"Look, mister, I just want you to know your money's safe. The cops have it. My name is Shell Scott—"

"Ha!" he said. "It is, hey? No, it's not, that's not your name, can't fool me. You're a crook, that's what you are."

His wife was in the door.

She screeched in his ear, "What did I say? Old fool, I warned you."

"Mattie," he said. "If you don't sit down and shut up . . ."

I tried some more, but he just wouldn't believe me. A glowing vision could have appeared in the sky crying, "You been tricked, Strossmin!" and the guy wouldn't have believed it. There are marks like him, who beg to be taken.

So finally I said, "Well, you win."

"What?"

"You win. Nothing I can do about it now. Store's yours." I put on a hangdog look. He cackled.

I said, "You can take over the place today, you know. Well, good-by—and the better man won."

"Today?"

"Yep. Folsom's Market, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, you go right down there. Ask for Mr. Gordon."

"Mr. Gordon?"

"Yep." I shook his hand. He cackled, and Mrs. Strossmin screeched at him, and he told her to shut up and I left. They were still going at it as I drove away to the Elmlunds'.

Mr. Elmlund didn't quite know what to do when I dropped the big packet of bills on his table and said the hoods were

in the clink. He stared at the money for a long time. When finally he did speak it was just, "I don't know what to say."

Jan came out onto the porch and I told them what happened and I thought they were going to crack up for a while, and then I thought they were going to float off over the trees, but finally Mr. Elmlund said, "I must pay you, Mr. Scott. I must."

I said, "No. Besides, I got paid."

Jan was leaning against the side of the door, smiling at me. She'd changed clothes and was wearing a smooth, clinging print dress now, and the way she looked I really should have had on dark glasses. She looked happy, wonderful, and her light-blue eyes were half-lidded, her gaze on my mouth.

"No," she said. "You haven't been paid."

Her tongue traced a smooth, gleaming line over her lower lip, and I remembered her fingers on my cheek, her lips against my skin.

"You haven't been paid, Shell."

I had a hunch she was right.

JAMES E. CRONIN

As stated in the general introduction, stories in the realistic school of crime fiction can sometimes be frightening, and this story, which concludes the collection, is a grim example. Here's James E. Cronin's story of a teacher named Benson who happens to find a bundle of money in Las Vegas.

The Man Who Found the Money

He was not afraid. There was nothing about the editor's quiet remark to be afraid of. But the skin at the back of his neck had pricked for a second, as if the short hair there had bristled.

That was after he had hunted out the bank, signed for a deposit box, and locked the ninety-two thousand dollars safely into it. Ninety-two thousand dollars in new bills, held together with a gold clip initialed *C. N.*

The ad he wrote out was brief:

> *Found, early Tuesday morning, a sum of money. Owner may have same by suitable identification and payment for this ad. Box —.*

The editor of the Las Vegas *Times* read the ad slowly, eyes following the point of his pencil. "Seventy cents," he said.

Benson pushed the coins across the counter and started out. He felt enormously virtuous but at the same time just a bit annoyed at his own honesty.

"It's none of my business," the editor's flat Western voice caught him at the door, "but was it a *large* sum of money?"

Surprised, Benson turned. "Well—yes."

The editor nodded. "You know," he said, "if I were you, I'd just go on over to the police station and let them know there. Money's important in this town. People are concerned about it."

"Name me a town where they aren't."

"I think you'll find they're more concerned here," the editor said.

That was all. But Benson felt the hair on the back of his neck rise in fear.

He shook off the feeling before he walked into the police station around the corner. Quickly he explained the matter to the sergeant at the desk.

"Just a minute." The sergeant disappeared into an office behind the railing, and almost at once returned. "Captain wants to see you," he said.

A big man, with the moonface and shiny dome of a politician, the captain had blank blue eyes set deep in flabby folds of skin. His blue shirt was open at the neck, dark with sweat under the arms. He motioned Benson to a seat and looked him over.

"You found some money," he began. "How much?"

Benson said, "I don't think I ought to mention the amount. At the proper time—"

"Was it in a gold clip marked *C. N.*?"

"You know about it!"

The captain held up a tanned hand. "Was it a hundred and two thousand dollars?"

Benson felt as if he had been slugged over the heart. Of all the possibilities he'd thought of, this had never occurred to him. With an effort he pulled air into his lungs. "Why—no," he said. "It was ninety-two thousand."

The captain didn't move.

"That's all there was!" Benson said loudly. "Ninety-two thousand! I can't imagine—"

"What's your name?" the captain said. He leaned forward and picked up a pencil.

"Benson. William Benson."

"Address?"

"Two-four-two Wesley, St. Louis."

"Occupation?"

"I'm a teacher—that is, a professor. Are you positive the amount was a hundred and two thousand?"

"Uh-huh. Yeah. When did you get into town?"

"Yesterday morning."

The captain opened a folder on the desk. "Registered at the Mirador?" Benson nodded. "And why did you come to Las Vegas, Professor?"

"To play roulette. But I think that's my own business. What is this, anyhow? Am I being booked? All I did was find some money and report it. If it's short, that's too bad. But I'm not going to stand for—"

"Okay," the captain interrupted heavily. "I just want to get things straight. You didn't win last night? You went broke?" There was only a slight question in the captain's voice.

Benson nodded. He'd scarcely thought about it since he'd awakened. Three years to save four hundred dollars—and one night to see it disappear, like water into the dry Las Vegas sand.

"I went broke," he said.

"Where did you find the money?"

"On Seventh Street, near the hotel. It was lying on the sidewalk in plain sight. Exactly ninety-two thousand!"

"Where were you coming from?"

"The Mesa Inn. It was about three thirty."

"Walk all the way?"

"Yes."

"So then you took the money and went back to the crap table at the Mesa—"

"The hell I did!" Benson slammed his fist on the desk. "Now look, Captain, I'm not accustomed—"

"Relax," said the captain. "What did you do between then and now?"

"I went to my room and counted the money. I didn't know what to do with it at that hour."

"You could have brought it here."

"I didn't think of it," Benson lied. "I thought I'd have to wait until morning to do anything. I finally hid it in my sock and pulled the sock half on. I braced a chair against the door and slept, off and on. It was a hell of a night."

There was no point, Benson realized, in saying anything more than that to the captain. The temptation to stuff the money in his suitcase, leave town at once, had been overpowering. Then he'd thought of something he'd read once: that banks keep a record of big bills.

If the roll had been in tens instead of thousand-dollar bills — *No!* he told himself. *I wouldn't have taken it, anyway. I don't think I would—*

Hell, what was honesty, after all? What was it worth? But he was there, in the police station; it didn't do any good to think about it now.

Benson stood up, feeling suddenly very tired and determined. "Well," he said, "you obviously know who lost the money. Do you want to call him up or shall I?"

"You've got the money with you?"

"It's in a box. At the bank."

The captain waited a second, then reached for the phone. "You're sure there's only ninety-two thousand?"

"I'm sure," Benson said.

The captain shrugged. "Okay. You'll stick around outside for a while. Close the door when you go out." He picked up the receiver.

Benson had been waiting only a few minutes when the flashy green convertible pulled up outside the station. A stocky, well-dressed man in gray flannel climbed out and came briskly in. Benson noticed the cornflower in the buttonhole, the immaculate white Stetson with a medium brim, the tanned face and the determinedly benevolent expression. He had a curious feeling that the face was a mask.

The desk sergeant said, "Good morning, Mr. Newsome!" The gray-clothed man lifted his hand in greeting and went into the captain's office. The door shut. Ten minutes passed.

The desk sergeant said, "You can go in now." Benson walked to the door and opened it. Standing in the door, he

had the impression that there had been an argument, though it might have been only a projection of his own uneasiness. He closed the door and stepped inside.

The captain ignored him. His face was redder, and he was methodically tapping his pencil on the desk, concentrating on it. Newsome, squinting to keep the smoke of his cigarette from his eyes, finished jotting something on a piece of paper, looked up and smiled.

"Mr. Benson!" he said, rising and extending his hand. "I'm certainly glad to meet you. I owe you a great debt."

Relief, like cool water, flowed down Benson's throat and into his knotted stomach. He could feel his body go limp. "I was glad to do it," he said. "Though—as the captain's told you—I found only ninety-two thousand of your money."

"Of course," Newsome said. "You checked your count?"

"Oh yes, sure."

Newsome nodded. He didn't seem in the least disturbed. "We'll find it," he said. "That much money doesn't stay lost in this town." For a second he appeared preoccupied, then became brisk again. "I've jotted down a list of denominations which I think will agree—minus the ten thousand—"

"Of course," Benson said. He looked at his list, moved his gaze to Newsome's. He didn't bother to compare them. "Okay, let's go get it," he said. "I'll be glad to get rid of it."

"I'll bet," Newsome said cheerfully. "Then we'll have to think about you. The captain here"—he slapped the hunched figure on the shoulder—"wanted to put you on the eleven o'clock train!"

"And it's still a good idea," the captain said, looking up.

"Hell!" Newsome slapped at the thought with the back of his hand. "Let's go, Benson."

The captain rose, hitching at his pants. "Wait a minute," he said. There was a long pause; he was obviously searching his mind for just the right words. "You—sure you're—uh—satisfied? Both of you?" He was looking at Benson.

Newsome cut in. "Sure, we're satisfied! Just forget the whole thing. Everything's under control—come on, Benson."

He turned and started out of the office. Benson stood for

a second looking at the captain; then he followed Newsome helplessly through the front area and out of the station, into the convertible. The seat was hot from the sun; the expensive scent of warm new leather filled his nostrils. He leaned back, fully relaxed, realizing slowly that the whole affair had taken on a *past* air, as if it had long ago been finished.

He'd take that eleven o'clock train, he thought—and maybe he'd have more than the bare carfare home. Newsome's attitude strongly suggested some kind of reward. . . .

But even that wasn't important. All he wanted now was to get home; home to Joyce and the baby; home, even, to the pleasant, shabby monotony of his teaching life. He couldn't expect—didn't want—anything more than that.

At the bank Newsome counted the money with surprising speed, flicking down the corner of the wad with his left thumb. "Ninety-two," he said slowly, went to deposit the money, and returned.

"Now," he said, smiling, "we take care of you. I'll have to talk things over with my partners first—but that'll be all right. First thing, anyhow, we're going out to the Pinto Inn. That's mine, you know."

Then there *would* be a reward, Benson thought, dazzled.

On the drive to the Pinto, Newsome enlarged on his plans. "I tell you you're going to call up your wife and get her to fly out here for a week. Stay at the Pinto, the two of you. Best of everything. On me."

And suddenly, for no reason at all, Benson wanted desperately to get away. Joyce, at the Pinto—it didn't seem right, somehow. Again he told himself angrily that he wasn't making sense. It would be the experience of a lifetime for Joyce: an all-expense Hollywood-type vacation, riding, swimming, golf, entertainment . . . yet he only said reluctantly, "Well—you're more than kind. I'll call her. See what she says."

"That's it," Newsome said. He swung the great car around the drive and stopped before the broad low sandstone steps of the hotel. "Give me an hour, though—to arrange things, check plane schedules, so on—before you call the lady.

Right?" Without waiting for an answer he took Benson's arm and started in.

"My bag—"

"Forget it. That's the least of your worries! Come on in here." He steered Benson into the cold gloom of the gambling casino that was the Pinto lobby. From somewhere out of the darkness a man appeared silently, and Newsome left Benson for a second, talked with his lieutenant, and then returned, chattering busily. "This is Mr. Lent, Mr. Benson. He'll take care of you. Make yourself a million—I'll be seeing you in a while, about that call . . ." and still talking, he turned and walked rapidly away into the dark.

Mr. Lent bowed. He explained that Mr. Benson was to have the courtesy of the house. And that meant, precisely? That meant that Mr. Benson simply called for such chips as he wanted, which the croupier would be glad to supply.

"For—nothing, you mean?"

Certainly. And what was Mr. Benson's game?

Crouched over the roulette table, grinning broadly and, he knew, idiotically, Benson felt a hand on his shoulder and spun around. His elbow knocked over a stack of chips, and he heard them clatter to the floor.

"The boss wants to see you," said a dim white coat in the darkness behind him.

"Fine," Benson said, trying to put the chips in his pockets.

"Let me help." Mr. Lent was suddenly, silently, beside him. "I'll cash in for you and bring the money in."

"Good," Benson said carelessly. Mr. Lent, he thought, was a fine fellow. Handy to have around. And the coming week would really be something! Joyce would probably think he was drunk when he told her. What a thrill she'd get out of the Pinto!

Still grinning, he followed the man through the cashier's office. The door was locked behind them. He walked down the narrow aisle between the filing cases and through another door, the guide stepping aside to let him go ahead. He heard the lock click behind him.

Behind a desk in the large office, Newsome stood, holding a phone. He looked up and nodded. "Put her on," he said, and handed the phone to Benson.

High, shrill, full of terror, her voice came through. "Bill!" The receiver shrieked tinnily. "Bill, are you there? Bill!"

He heard his voice saying, remotely, "What is it? Is the baby—what's the matter?"

"Bill. There are two awful men here—they—"

The receiver was ripped from his hand. In a haze he saw Newsome cradle the phone. He reached for it, but Newsome's hand remained on the receiver.

"Sit down." Newsome put one square palm on his chest and shoved him into a chair.

"My wife is in trouble! You cut me off! Why—"

"Your wife isn't in trouble."

"But I heard her—"

"Sit down and listen." Newsome's face, without the beam of benevolence, was the emptiest face Benson had ever seen. "You thought you were getting away with something," he continued evenly. "You fooled the captain. You didn't fool me. If you play straight now, everything will be okay. I don't bother holding grudges. But you get tough, and sometime tonight they're going to find your wife and kid at the bottom of a hill in a burning car."

It was so horrible, so impossible, that Benson felt his mouth pull back into a grin, idiotically, and he stared at Newsome's hand without seeing it for a second. The hand was extended toward him, palm up, waiting.

Newsome said, "And now, you bastard, let's have my ten thousand dollars."

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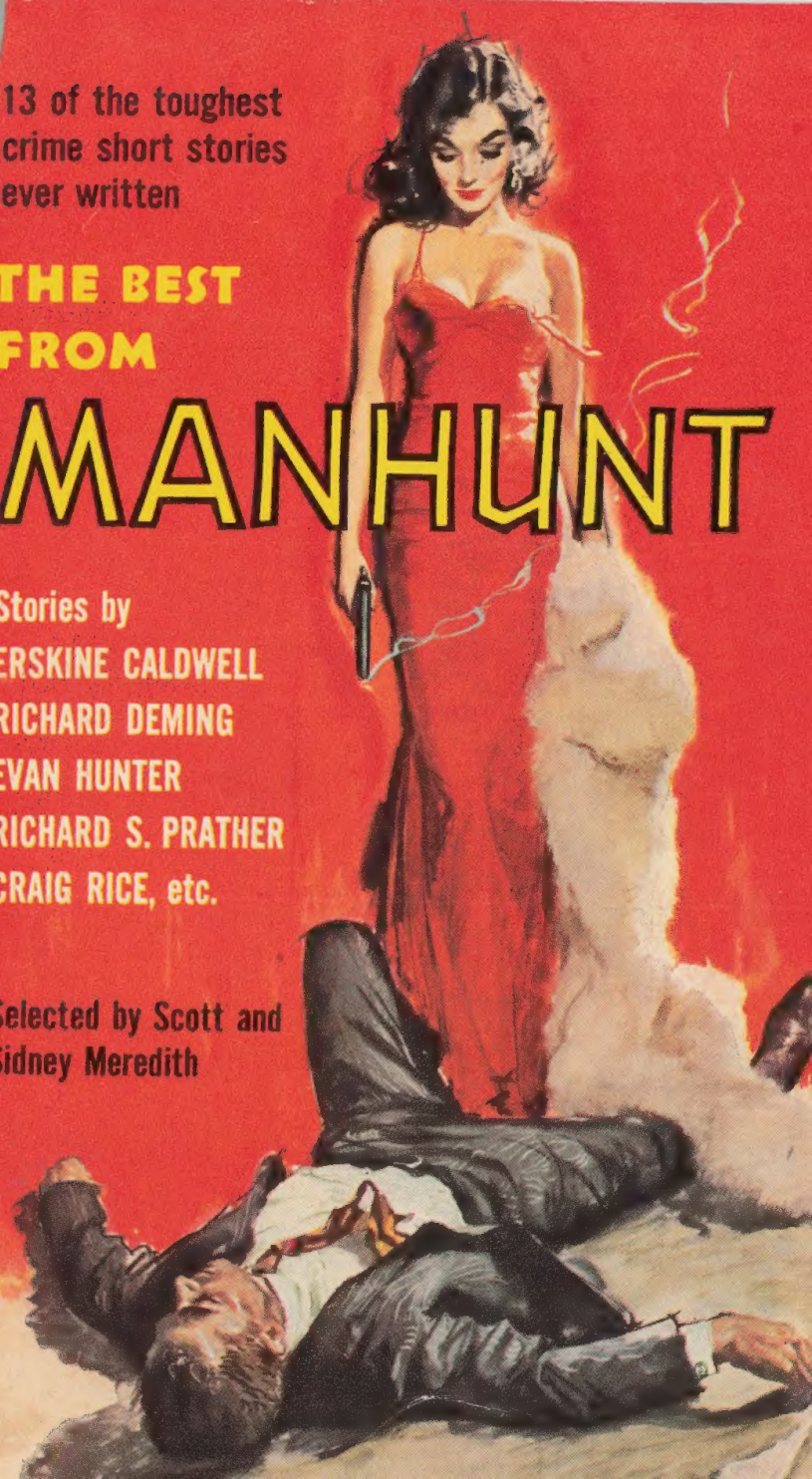
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